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The Most Profound is the Skin: The Power of Tattoos

[Abstract] The aim of this paper is not to provide a psychological explanation of the practice of tattooing but rather to think out, from a philosophical point of view, the practice of tattoo in its political and social dimension and in its two opposite directions. Special attention will be given to the tattoo practice among prisoners and criminals mainly through the specific case-study of a Portuguese collection of tattoos recollected by the “Legal Medicine Institute of Lisbon” in-between 1910 and 1930 (it will be seen for the first time in near future in an exhibition I am curating entitled “The most profound is the skin”). In this sense, I propose to see how the turn of the XX century got back to a negative look upon tattooing and to grasp the meaning of all this negative movement through Foucault’s philosophical perspective.

[Keywords] tattoo, power, domination, submission, visual language

Historical context. The practice of tattoo is the more ancient practice of body’s modification we know. In 1991, in the Ötztal Alps, the alpine glacier along the Austrian–Italian border, a tourist couple discovered a frozen human body having sixty-one tattoos all over his body. After a long study of the body, the researchers at the “EURAC-Institute for Mummies and the Iceman” published their findings in the *Journal of Cultural Heritage in January 2015*. The mummy became known as Ötzi, the “European Tyrolean Iceman”, estimated to be died somewhere around 3250 BC¹.

¹ Cf. M. Samadelli, M. Melis, M. Miccoli, E. Egarter Vigl & A. R. Zink, “Complete mapping of the tattoos of the 5300-year-old Tyrolean Iceman”, *Journal of Cultural Heritage* 16, 753-758, <http://www.eurac.edu/en/research/health/iceman/Pages/newsdetails.aspx?entryid=109475> (accessed 25/10/2016).

Even if it is impossible to determine its beginning, we know that tattooing is a very ancient and spread practice. Several archaeological findings (tattoo tools and preserved human skin) show that tattooing took place in ancient Greece, Persia, was present among the ancient Britons and Gauls, in Africa, Americas and Asia². But, besides its large extended reach since antiquity, tattoo had different meaning in each culture. In Polynesia, tattoo is mainly a male ceremony testing resistance towards pain and fight skills for battle. However, in ancient Egypt, it seems that the art of tattooing was mainly a female practice, transversal to all social classes, from women supposed to be prostitutes to a high priestess named Amunet³. The most ancient tattooed women belonged to small agriculture communities, around 2300-1500 BC, and were offered to the king of Egypt in order to be married with the military chiefs⁴. In both cases, tattoo practice was taken as a religious ritual and a symbol of strength or fertility and long-life.

But, tattoos were also used with a social and political dimension. Tattooing works now as a proof of submission of the subject towards his master, or as the sign of the superiority of the penal system, as an infliction directly done to the body of the subject. For example, in Greco-Roman times, tattoo was a way of marking the prisoners and slaves as a symbol of inferiority. The same happened with the Nazis who tattooed Jews in the concentration camps as a sign of exclusion and punishment. On the contrary, in Central Asia, during the 4th and the 3rd century BC, tattoos were found mainly in

² Cf. C. Taliaferro & M. Odden, "Tattoos and the Tattooing Arts in Perspective: An Overview and Some Preliminary Observations", in: R. Arp (ed.), *Tattoos: philosophy for everyone: I Ink, Therefore I Am*. Oxford: John Wiley & Sons 2012, 4.

³ Cf. C. Taliaferro & M. Odden, "Tattoos and the Tattooing Arts in Perspective: An Overview and Some Preliminary Observations", 6.

⁴ Cf. L. Renaut, "Le tatouage dans l'Antiquité", in : *Tatoueurs, Tatoués*. Paris: Musée du Quai Branly/Actes Sud 2014, 24.

half-nomad elites of society, namely chiefs and warriors, as a way of competition for power and recognition among their community⁵. As Luc Renaut states, “the sovereign and the administration of the big temples in the Ancient Middle East sometimes tattooed their workforces in order to avoid alienation or deviance”⁶.

Other diverse tattoo meaning may also be recovered. In ancient Greece and Rome, more organized administrative societies where a system of archive files already existed, tattoos were used not only as a mark of penal sanction or ownership (of prisoners and workers) but also as ornament. And in old artisan medicines, tattoo may have a therapeutic function, running as a little surgery, made in the site of the pain in order to block or to facilitate the exchange of fluids. In other cultures, tattoo may also be, for instance, the sign of loyalty, of leadership/membership of a community, of the affirmation of magical powers, of the availability to mate as a symbol of fertility.

However, this tattoos numerous meanings will slowly become reduced to a single point of view. With Christianity, a negative conception of tattoo as transgression and taboo will prevail. Even if, since the Neolithic times, tattoo was a ceremonial practice with many and different meanings according to the diverse cultures, performed through several methods in diverse social contexts all over the world, always having a positive meaning from fertility to magic powers, yet, tattoo gradually became a symbol of transgressive habits, a practice of demoniac and negative character. This change is mostly due to the rise and spread of Christian authority and encouragement⁷. In fact, both Old and New Testament took a great role in this condemnation of the tattoo. A quote from a teaching in *Leviticus* leaves no doubt for

⁵ Cf. L. Renaut, “Le tatouage dans l’Antiquité”.

⁶ L. Renaut, “Le tatouage dans l’Antiquité”, 26.

⁷ As R. Ferreira writes, “in 787 AC, the Catholic Church forbids tattoo and declares it an object of pagan practices” (our translation). “Tatuagens: arte no corpo”, in: *Comunicação, Arte e Cultura* 14/12/2011, <https://comartecultura.wordpress.com/tag/tatuagens/> (accessed 14/9/2016).

the recrimination of the (now) forbidden practice: “You shall not make any cuts in your body for the dead nor make any tattoo marks on yourselves: I am the Lord” (19:28). And in the *New Testament*, in *Revelations*, there is a female figure, probably a prostitute, described as “The Woman on the Beast” which seems to be tattooed: “On her forehead a mysterious name was written: Babylon the Great, the mother of prostitutes and of abominations of the earth” (17:5)⁸.

Only in the XV century, when Europe emerged from the Christian Medieval Era and entered an age of explorations and adventures, Europeans recovered a certain positive look upon tattoos, now viewed as exotic and exuberant natural manifestations. We could even say that the passage from the Old World into the New World was more than the discovery of new territories: it was also the re-discovering of tattoos. As Taliaferro and Odden explain:

“The first modern record of tattoos dates from James Cook’s expedition to Tahiti in 1769 (...). Thus, tattooing slowly became an American folk art during the late nineteenth century. Tattoos were featured in the context of carnivals and circuses, but they slowly became integral to some elements of popular culture”⁹.

In the New World, tattoos were considered as rare and bizarre. However,

⁸ Cf. the references of Old Testament in: <http://biblehub.com/leviticus/19-28.htm> and of New Testament in: <http://biblehub.com/revelation/17-5.htm> (accessed 01/07/2916). On this subject cf. also C. Taliaferro & M. Odden, “Tattoos and the Tattooing Arts in Perspective: An Overview and Some Preliminary Observations”, 5. It is quite curious that in the Hebrew Bible, we find a complete different, even opposite concept of tattoo: not as a God’s prohibition, but rather a divine protection. Being a salvation, tattoo is not a deprivation undertaken by some criminal, but the sign of a special and protected saint. Cf. E. Juniper, “How to read a tattoo, and other perilous quests”, in: R. Arp (ed.), *Tattoos: Philosophy for Everyone: I Ink, Therefore I Am*. Oxford: John Wiley & Sons 2012, 15-6.

⁹ C. Taliaferro & M. Odden, “Tattoos and the Tattooing Arts in Perspective: An Overview and Some Preliminary Observations”, 5.

with the time pass, they became more and more objects of desire. Shown in circuses as popular objects of exhibition, their role became more and more akin to desire and sexual determination. Much later, during the Victorian era in Europe, tattooing becomes a fashionable popular practice in specific male communities, like sailors, and in America, during the civil war, it became a much trendy custom among soldiers¹⁰. It is not surprising that, in the 1960s, the work of the well-known biologist Alfred Kinsey, who found the celebrated “Institute for Sex Research” at Indiana University, USA, was of a big influence to the sexual revolution in the 60’s¹¹. And today, as we can retrospectively realise, the same positive view of tattooing turns it out to be not only a popular practice but a mainstream fashion.

Two opposite directions of tattooing. As we have seen, tattoo is a very controversial practice. Since its beginning in a non well identified time, it seems that it has always been object of a positive and a negative use. But, there is another main opposition which is underlying all tattoo practice. In fact, by tattooing we mean two inverse movements: domination and submission. The tattoo has been used – and maybe it is still used today in some underground, secretive and criminal phenomenon of human traffic – as a domination strategy for marking prisoners and slaves as symbol of inferiority and obedience. On the other hand, we are also aware that in most of the submission context – be it a lawful incarceration, be it illegal circumstances of obedience and humiliation – tattoo tends to emerge as a counter practice among the submitted persons.

Now, face to these inverse movements of the tattooing practices, what is really astonishing is the effective counter-practice who guides the submit-

¹⁰ C. Taliaferro & M. Odden, “Tattoos and the Tattooing Arts in Perspective: An Overview and Some Preliminary Observations”, 5.

¹¹ Cf. in S. Steward, *Bad Boys and Tough Tattoos: A Social History of the Tattoo with Gangs, Sailors, and Street-corner Punks, 1950-1965*. London: Routledge 1990, 40-43.

ted individual to tattooing him/herself. So, it is necessary to ask: How to explain the classical practice of a prisoner who voluntarily tattoos him/herself? Why is this practice so spread out? Why did it become a kind of universal language for criminals and prisoners to express themselves?

Lévi-Strauss offers a possible explanation. According to the famous anthropologist, who dedicated a huge part of his work studying several tribes in South America and New Zealand, there is a religious continuity in the meaning of tattoo all over the world, mainly in what concerns the psychological and social aspects. As he writes:

Among the Maori, as among the natives of the Paraguayan border, facial and corporal decoration is executed in a semi-religious atmosphere. Tattoos are not only ornaments. As we already noted with respect to the Northwest Coast (and the same thing may be said of New Zealand), they are not only emblems of nobility and symbols of rank in the social hierarchy; they are also messages fraught with spiritual and moral significance. The purpose of Maori tattooing is not only to imprint a drawing onto the flesh but also to stamp onto the mind all the traditions and philosophy of the group. Similarly, the Jesuit missionary Sanchez Labrador has described the passionate seriousness with which the natives devoted whole days to letting themselves be painted. He who is not painted, they said, is “dumb”¹².

So, according to Lévi-Strauss we could say that, in those cases where the individual tattoos him/herself, he/she is practicing tattoo as a spiritual lesson for his/her life, engraving in his/her body the long tradition. Maybe such explanation can be extended to the case mentioned in the question above: the self tattooing done by prisoner or criminal could be viewed as the act of giving force and spiritual strength to a minority under submission. The prisoner tattoos him/herself as a way of receiving religious strength and power

¹² C. Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. C. Jacobson & B. Grundfest Schoepf. New York: Basic Books 1963, 257.

in order to better face the problems included in his/her social recrimination/inferiority.

Yet, a completely different explanation was very influential at the beginning of the XX century:

Tattooed men who are not behind bars are either latent criminals or degenerate aristocrats. If someone who is tattooed dies in freedom, then he does so a few years before he would have committed murder¹³.

This is a quotation from Adolf Loos (1870-1933), a famous Austrian architect, coming from his much influential essay *Ornament and Crime*. This essay was written in 1908 and it was a kind of a *manifesto* against all forms of aesthetic decoration and a declaration of social and economic aversion to waste. Opposed to the *Art Nouveau* movement, Loos was a modern rationalist. He believed that everything that could not be justified by reason was superfluous and should be deleted. As he writes: “The evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornament from utilitarian objects”¹⁴. For Loos, culture resulted in the renunciation of passions, and I quote again: “Freedom from ornament is a sign of spiritual strength”¹⁵. As well as the shape of the building, the skin of a body should also be determined only by reason, and there is no place for adornments¹⁶. So, we could say that according to Loos every kind of tattooing, including those made my prisoners and criminals to themselves, is an effect of a degenerated individual, it corresponds to an interior necessity that the individual cannot escape.

Loos’ puritanism echoes the Victorian Era and it strongly stressed the

¹³ A. Loos, “Ornament and Crime”, in: U. Conrads (ed.) *Programs and Manifestoes on 20th-century architecture*, trans. M. Bullock. Cambridge/Massachussets: MIT Press 1971, 19.

¹⁴ A. Loos, “Ornament and Crime”, 20.

¹⁵ A. Loos, “Ornament and Crime”, 24.

¹⁶ It is interesting to note that this thesis goes perfectly well in accordance with the fact that Loos was one of the first interior designers of modern times and he took much care of ornament inside the houses. The interior was the mirror of moral integrity and good manners.

moralist struggle against the degeneracy of Central Europe at the end of the 19th century. Precisely because of the conception of interior design as the translation of one's manner and spirit, the tattoos were viewed as immoral, as the sign of a rebel person who does not follow normative social habits. Loos' book *Ornament and Crime* expresses quite well the main point of view on tattoos at those rigid times. Now, this negative and pejorative judgment on tattoos was defended in Western culture and it became the "institutional" point of view on tattoo at the turn of the 20th century. It led to a huge production of studies based on the hypothesis of a direct relation between tattooing and predisposition to delinquency. In the area of evolutionary theory, for instance, tattoo was seen as the expression of the savage and primitive state of mankind. And it was the same negative view on tattoo that was spread out through Medicine and all the Social Sciences.

Medical approach. The Portuguese example of a tattoo collection. In fact, all over Europe, medical academies, in their attempted of finding a scientific justification for deviant behavior, put forward the hypothesis of considering tattoo as the expression of personality disorders. French and Italian schools of Legal Medicine were the most radical. That is the case of the French criminologist Lyonnais Alexandre Lacassagne (1843-1924) who, after making a huge research on more than three hundred soldiers as a military physician, emphasised that idea in his famous book *Les tatouages: Étude anthropologique et medico-légale* (1881)¹⁷.

The general assumption that tattooed persons had a predisposition to the practice of crime ended in the effective incarceration of the tattooed persons in correctional services. In France, as Jérôme Pierrat refers:

¹⁷ Cf. J. Pierrat, "Le tatouage dans l'armée", in : S. Galliot & P. Bagot (ed.), *Tatouers, Tatoués*. Musée du Quai Branly, 39 and also E. Juniper, "How to read a tattoo, and other perilous quests", 14.

“In 1831, a normative document on tattoos is sent to the directors of central (prison) houses and, in October 1849, a communication from the Interior Ministry states that tattoos can help in the identification of delinquents”¹⁸.

Also, the English Government, in 1879, adopted tattoo as a way of identifying criminals¹⁹.

This hypothesis of a strong correlation between crime/deviant behaviour and the practice of tattoo was also working among the Portuguese medical community in the beginning of the XX century. The outstanding collection of the tattoos preserved at the “Portuguese Institute of Legal Medicine” is an eloquent outcome. The collection has been recently studied by a Portuguese physician, Dr. Carlos Branco, who also dedicated himself to the restoration of its exemplars. The following description of the collection is based on the documentation Carlos Branco gently shared with me²⁰.

As Carlos Branco explains, the collection was mainly constituted by the physician and director of the “Lisbon’s Criminology Institute”, Rudolfo Xavier da Silva (1877-1948). He was the one who carefully recovered and studied the tattoo of the marginal, impoverished and criminals who arrived to the Institute of Legal Medicine and of the prisoners arrested at the central penitentiary of Lisbon. The collection is quite rich. It is constituted by a series of impressive skin tattooed fragments, by a significant number of drawings and by a detailed documentation archive. The infrequent and extraordinary skin exemplars have recently been fully restored by Carlos Branco and are now accurately preserved in about seventy bottles of formaldehyde.

¹⁸ J. Pierrat, “Le tatouage dans l’armée”.

¹⁹ Cf. “Tatuagens: arte no corpo”.

²⁰ C. Branco, *Recuperação patrimonial e museológica de uma coleção de pele humana tatuada do Instituto Nacional de Medicina Legal e Ciências Forenses (1.ª metade do séc. XX)*, Master Dissertation under the supervision of João Brigola, Raquel Henriques da Silva, Jorge Costa Santos. Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas of the Universidade Nova de Lisboa 2016 (in press).



image [left]:
Fragment of tattooed skin from the Portuguese “Legal Medicine Institute of Lisbon”, recently restored by Dr. Carlos Branco.

The huge documental archive – also preserved at the “Historical Archives of the Legal Medical Institute” – offers comprehensive information complementing each fragment of skin. Thus, each tattoo skin fragment has a complete information dossier about the correspondent tattooed individual. This dossier includes diverse legal documentation, mainly from legal police such

as name, date and place of birth, occupation, affiliation, civil status, residence, social habits, frequented locations, date and circumstances of death, reconstruction of the life’s history. It also includes photographs of the individuals, weapons and firearms of crimes in which they were involved as victims or as aggressors, remains of their clothes, sketches of the crime and dead scenes, biological materials of the individuals (e.g. hair), plaster face masks, newspapers refereeing the crimes, etc. It is very interesting to note

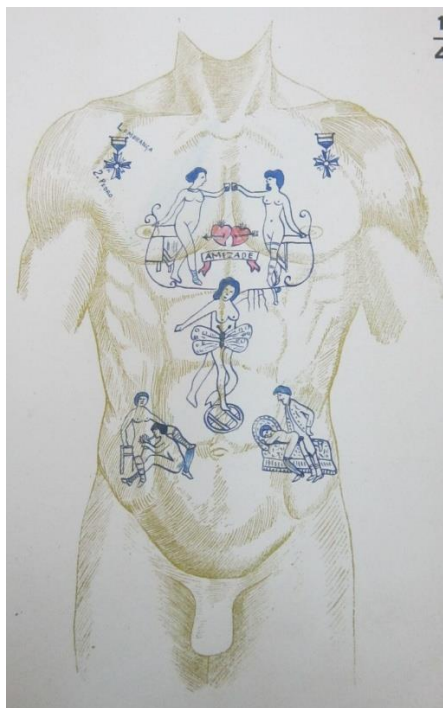


image [left]:
Drawing from the documental archive of
the Portuguese "Legal Medicine Institute of
Lisbon".

that the crossed-information gathered about each individual included, further than the medical process and the additional documentation from the Legal Police, a lot of information about the very tattoos: their preparatory drawings, the reason for their choice, their cost, the place where each was done, the name of the artist who made them, the techniques, equipment and materials used.

In his article published in 1923²¹, Xavier da Silva extensive study of this collection enabled him to obtain a series of results with statistical signifi-

²¹ Cf. R. Xavier da Silva, "Estudo sobre a iconografia das tatuagens", in: *Arquivo de Anatomia e Antropologia*, VIII. Lisboa: Instituto de Anatomia de Lisboa 1923, 112-115.

cance. Among his relevant conclusions, we highlight the possibility of identifying a stereotypical profile of the tattooed individuals. They are mainly male young people (ruffians, indigents, delinquents), mainly from Lisbon poor neighbourhoods, common clients of prostitutes, and night clubs and *fado* taverns. A second conclusion concerns the few tattooed women of the collection who are almost always prostitutes who tattoo themselves under request of their lovers and, for that reason, they tattoo the initial and/or their lover's name. A third conclusion concerns the most frequent themes used by the tattooed individuals consisting mainly in names and dates; fantastist and metaphoric drawings such as the typical hearts of love; erotic and pornographic illustrations; abstract points (five wounds); religious representations; symbolic pictures (e.g. anchors); patriotic and political signs as crowns, national flags, monarchical and republican symbols, busts of heads of political personalities; and other figurative pictures (sailors, prostitutes, women singers of *fado*, exotic animals, football/sports).

The tattoo and the institutional power. Thus, in Portugal as in other countries, a whole machine was set up in order to establish a portrait of the criminal-type: anthropometric studies, photography and drawings of the tattoos, medical reports, police reports and even civil documentation. Now, what is interesting to emphasize is the fact that this documental machine responds to an epistemology of deviance, an epistemology linked to criminology – a new scientific discipline which was able to circumscribe a new object of study: the delinquent and his/her consciousness.

The French philosopher Michel Foucault is the one who best explained the emergence and operational manner of this machine. According to Foucault from his celebrated book *Surveiller et Punir* (1975), behind this kind of collections there is a systematic will of scientific knowledge and of power. The constitution of such collections responds to a controlling program of the individuals by the governmental institutions. Power, says Foucault, is a

strategy, a technique, an abstract machine that functions independently from who governs it, an autonomous and non-personified machine that controls the bodies and the lives of the individuals²². The process of collecting and cataloging the tattooed images, the documentation made around each case, the files and archives on the lives of tattooed bodies, all this legal, institutional practices are part of a power apparatus aiming to know, and therefore to control, the lives of the subjects. As Foucault writes: “There is no relation of power without the correlative constitution of a knowledge field, neither a knowledge without both supposing and constituting power relations”²³. So, power and knowledge are always in straight relation, not only because each of them would support or need the other in a kind of external fraternity relation, but rather in a necessary way, i.e., they are constitutive one from the other. Also, Foucault shows that this power machine is not centralized but transversal to all layers of institutions: schools, hospitals, military headquarters, industries (fabrics) and prisons, all functioning as panoptic devices, i.e., as architectural structures allowing the controller a perfect view over the subject’s action²⁴. Foucault also argues that the power machine is a disciplinary machine, i.e., the control of citizens is done through discipline, as a power over the body’s gestures and postures, over the people’s uses of time, a form of controlling people’s lives and behaviors.

²² Cf. M. Foucault, *Surveiller et Punir*. Paris: Gallimard 1975, 31.

²³ M. Foucault, *Surveiller et Punir*, 32.

²⁴ The Panopticon is a technique. A technique of control. “The Panopticon is a machine to dissociate the couple seen – be seen : in the peripheral ring, we are totally seen, without ever seeing; in the central tower, one sees everything, without ever being seen” (M. Foucault, *Surveiller et Punir*, 203, our translation). The idea is to render the subject an object of information and never an element of communication. The panoptic is a device of power that reduces the individual to an object of observation, the new object of the whole new emerged Social Sciences. “The Panopticon functions like a kind of laboratory of power. Thanks to its observation mechanisms, it gains in efficiency and capacity of penetration in the behavior of the men” (M. Foucault, *Surveiller et Punir*, 206, our translation).

Therefore, Foucault helps us to understand why, together with the seventy flacons of formaldehyde, together with the drawings and all the material and visual data carefully recovered by the Portuguese Legal Medicine Institute, the collection includes a whole documental archive. In fact, the discipline of the penal system is based on the documentation. It is the documentation (the archives, the law, the descriptions of the criminal, etc.) that sustains, that gives impact and power to the penal system. Times had changed: justice is not anymore made in the public sphere, by crucifying the criminals and applying to their bodies the cruelest physical punishments. Now, justice is more subtle, but also more pragmatic: justice system needs to write down every detail on the criminals in order to prove that justice is now a serious, even more effective, way of punishment. Documentation appears as a guarantee of the scientificity, and thus of efficiency and legitimacy of the very penal system. As Foucault writes:

What is at stake in this new knowledge, is a question of “scientifically” qualifying the act as a “crime” and especially the individual as a delinquent. The possibility of a criminology is thus given²⁵.

This is why, according to Foucault, Medicine began to be so rigorous in doing a full and detailed description of the criminal. Medicine was also changing: it was becoming a very useful tool for the new arrived Social Sciences. It is not by accident that Sociology, Anthropology, Psychology, appeared precisely in this very moment, when a new justice system needed to be more coercive and powerful, turning the punishment from the physical body towards conscious and soul. The new Justice system has now its allies: Medicine, as well as the Social Sciences, which acquired their scientific status precisely by this need of a scientific proof of the new justice system. All scientific

²⁵ M. Foucault, *Surveiller et Punir*, 258 (our translation).

studies (anthropologic/sociologic/psychologic studies) were working together with the Justice. Quoting Foucault again:

A whole army of technicians came to take over the control from the executioner, the immediate anatomist of suffering: the supervisors, the doctors, the chaplains, the psychiatrists, the psychologists, the educators; by their mere presence close to the condemned, they sing the praise that justice is needing: they offer to the justice the guarantee that the body and the pain are not the last objects of its punitive action²⁶.

Of course there is a very positive aspect in all this machine: it is a correctional machine, i.e., it teaches how to behave and so it avoids criminality. And it does so, because the system wins in scientific dimension and in dignity (the respect for being more subtle and well documented) what it loses in spectacle of cruelty. But, what we want to emphasize, what is important to highlight in order to answer the question put above about the nature of tattooing as a counter-practice, is the fact that, according to Foucault, this recently constituted science of the deviant, all this new field of knowledge (semiology of crime), is extended over the criminals themselves who, by that reason, paradoxically tend to collaborate with it: they tattoo themselves in order to document, to certificate, to make visible their criminal condition:

In this game the condemned answer themselves, displaying their crime and giving the representation of their misdeeds: it is one of the functions of the tattoo, vignette of their exploitation or of their destiny²⁷.

²⁶ M. Foucault, *Surveiller et Punir*, 17 (our translation).

²⁷ M. Foucault, *Surveiller et Punir*, 264.

Conclusion: the power of tattoo. In the old reign of Justinian, in Constantinople, (527-565), there is a medical note from a doctor, named *Aetius*, referring to tattoos as *Stigmata*²⁸. Now, after this short path on tattooing practice through the eyes of Foucault, we may say that this concept of *Stigmata* was still a naïve, mere descriptive concept. From the 19th century on, tattoo became not a simple *Stigma* but a true sign. Besides being made by the system, it assumed the capacity of expressing a criminal type; it became a clinical manifestation of the dark, deviant and possible criminal interior. Short, tattoo became a *Symptom*.

Getting to the conclusion, let us get back to the examples mentioned before.

I believe that, if we compare the paradigmatic image of a tattooed prisoner (e.g., the classical five signs' inscription in the hand) with the roman slaves marked by their masters or the Jews stigmatized by the Nazis, and if we analyse these two kind of inverse examples (the prisoner tattooing him/herself and the master tattooing a dominated subject) under the Foucauldian ontological thesis according to which power only exists within a field of strength in between two opposed forces: the subject and the Master, i.e., power only exists in between the force of control and the force of resistance, then, we may affirm that tattoo is always a chain of the power machine. Almost a magnetic force, tattoo is either used by the master to show his/her power, either by the subject as the confirmation of the power of the master. And even when tattoo is used by the prisoner as a way of resisting the power of the incarceration system, and – more generally – when it is made with a transgressive aim, it does not escape its condition of a power device. This also means that, tattoo is always a social map, a statement of the

²⁸ Cf. C. P. Jones, "Stigma and Tattoo", in: J. Caplan (ed.), *Written on the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 2000, 4-5. *Stigmata* is the plural of the Greek word *στίγμα* (*stigma*), meaning a mark, tattoo. Cf. C. P. Jones, "Stigma: Tattooing & Branding in Graeco-Roman Antiquity", *Journal of Roman Studies* 77, 1987, 139-155.



image [right]:
O Fado, oil on
canvas 151x186
cm, 1910,
painted by the
Portuguese
painter José
Malhoa (1855 –
1933. Museum
of Fado, Lisbon.

individual position towards society, be it emergent from the system, be it an anti-system deviance. *O Fado*, canvas painted by the famous Portuguese painter José Malhoa (1855-1933) where we see a celebrated *fado* singer at her time, Severa (also known as Adelaide da Facada). In the original painting, Severa was tattooed in all the extension of her arm but the King D. Manuel obliged the painter to paint over that part, in order to “clean” the tattoos, forbidden at that time.

In this final point, we cannot resist to ask if the counter practice of tattoo – so spread and fashionable as it is today – could not be seen otherwise.

Will it not be possible to think out tattooing as a language of its own, a device with ontological existence and autonomy? Will it not be possible to think out tattooing as a language through which people may express (and enjoy!) their freedom, to convey their interiority, to relieve themselves from slavery or incarceration, etc? Will it not be possible to think out tattooing as

a visual language within an epidermal grammar? Will it not be possible to think out tattooing as the production of an image, even when it is reduced to a sentence, a phrase or a name? An image-body, a body that expresses itself through image, a language that takes the skin instead of the voice or the paper as its vehicle, a language that speaks through the skin instead of the voice, a language not to be spoken, just visualized?

Let me finish with two quotations which both go in that direction:

One from Deleuze and Guattari: “A mark on the body [is] a graphic system, a geo-graphism, a geography”²⁹.

And the other from Roland Barthes: “Language is a skin: I rub my language against the other. It is as if I had words as fingers, or fingers at the end of my words”³⁰.

At last, after this (small and quick) adventure on the history and philosophy of tattoo, I came to realize the deep, profound meaning of the French poet Paul Valéry dictum: “*That which is most profound in the human being is the skin*”³¹.

Between Truth and Transgression: the Shifting Nature of the Scientific Image

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²⁹ G. Deleuze & F. Guattari, *L'Anti-Œdipe*. Paris: Minuit 1972, 222 (our translation).

³⁰ R. Barthes, *Fragments du discours amoureux*. Paris: Seuil 1977, 87 (our translation).

³¹ P. Valéry, “L'idée fixe”, in : *Œuvres Complètes*. Paris: Gallimard 1969, 215.

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