Note e studi critici

Tattoos, piercings and re-configuration of the body
A path between bioethical and educational profiles

Carmela Bianco1*

Abstract

Everything can become a mask if we use it for masquerading. The tattoo is the anthropological roots of ancient and modern makeup that refers to the mask understood as that which creates the face, which gives it its social being. The tattoo is also an artistic decoration that should be born by the deep desire to communicate yourself to others. Tattoos must be able to "tell" the people who wear them, but if the latter decorate their body with a message or image that does not belong, it can cause the destruction of individuality. The tattoo is immortal. It can be a permanent dress, a way to resist the unwanted transformations using a piece of subjective identity, non-imitable, from which one cannot be excluded. Along with careful identification of psycho-sociological motivations that drive a young man to want a tattoo, you need to traverse an education that not only form a personality, teaches the knowledge of his own body. Getting a tattoo means not only change the morphology of the body but the risk of jeopardizing their health. Responsibility for their own health also means being aware that a tattoo can procure mild side effects or more severe depending on the initial state of health of the subject. Then a tattoo only after a careful history following the favorable opinion of the doctor and after a personal assessment aware. These initial objectives of a path bioethical-pedagogical significant.

Keywords

Tatuaggio – Corpo – Memoria

1 Dipartimento di studi storico-filosofici “Pasquale Orlando”, PFTIM sezione “S. Tommaso”, Napoli, Italia
* e-mail: karbia1@virgilio.it
Tattoos, piercing and body modification practices are now increasingly common in the contemporary population, not just the occidental. Indeed they have become the real mode "painting" and "sculpture" on the body of the human being that can well represent the need for a multidisciplinary approach, especially when one tries to assess the potential profiles of an ethical and socio-political. Drawing your own body, changing it more or less permanently with piercing, re-configuring it in the skin and in his attitude of "coverage" of the muscles and bones, even before the clothes or the designer dress, or in the production of aesthetic carnal art... these practices are coming more and more into the curve of attention not only, as it happened the past, of cultural anthropologists and phenomenologists of religion, but also of sociologists, social psychologists and psychotherapists and, lately, because of the strong symbolic performed from the body, even of the scholars of symbolic hermeneutics and, consequently, of bioethicists who, since the neologism ‘bioethics’ was made, are increasingly interested not only to the medical and health resonances of these practices, but especially to their symbolism and as a result, to any disputes that may be generated during the search of the delicate balance between individual needs of the subjects, reference values of human groups and the broader socio-cultural context.

If the anthropology insisted on aggregating or disaggregating aspects of these "drawings" on the body, medicine and health sciences evaluate the dermatological relevance, as well as the aesthetic one, and often also the implications of the psychotherapy, focusing on the need to assess in advance the pathological relevance of the preparations, dyes and engraving techniques, or to verify possible correlations among "excessive" changes in the body and depressive disorders.

It is as if the discovery of the body, in its doubled meaning of the body "quantum" and body "lived" (dialectic Leib-Körper), from cultural anthropology and philosophy passes more and more into the orbit of the social bioethics and bio-politics, through by the unusual way of the skin and its voluntary modifications. As a result, it is bioethical and pedagogically relevant that, particularly in our Occident, while they move critics to the practices of some groups, because they are even considered to be detrimental to the dignity and integrity of the human body, or, while it is criticized the not voluntariness of practices of circumcision imposed on the sons of a Jewish mother, you end up at the same time to admit, even advisable as forms, methods of extreme body-building, plastic surgery, games of pervasive and temporary piercing and modifications of the flesh, which sometimes take the form of almost ritual or initiation rites in some subcultures, not only among young people and, at least in some cases, do not seem less offensive to the personal dignity. The practices of interventions on the body with aesthetic purposes, such as tattooing, permanent makeup and body art in general, have, from the point of view of the social health, in the recent years, an increasingly popularity in Italy. In this connection it has been found also
an increase of reports of adverse events related to the execution of such interventions and the use of such products.

All this, finally, happens in a cultural horizon that is facing the fall of the ultimate meanings, and therefore also the collapse of the significance of the body as representative of the human being, with his subsequent confinement, at least, to the rank of "mask", with the subsequent loss, or de-enhancement of the person.\(^1\)

### 2. Behind the tattooed mask

The study of the tattoo in the so-called "primitive communities" has been, in cultural anthropology, particularly focused on the form of tattoos, and especially on the local meanings that are attributed to this practice. The tattoo could represent so an important artistic expression in primitive cultures, as well as social, magical and tribal. The tattoo has communicated myths and fears, which have narrated and made the history of many communities. In these communities, these drawings, which cover the whole body, symbolically manifest the "socialization" of the human body, through the submission of one's corporeality to behaviors and common social values.\(^2\) The tattooed skin gives, in these communities, the sense of belonging to the group.\(^3\) And just within a social group, the tattoo represented a means of social identification: it indicated the caste of each individual. The body became a means of communication or a way of being and manifesting themselves and their communicative nature.

As indicated, the configuration of the body as a thing, or a machine, such as what actually happened in some of the results of the modern Europe, would have constituted an involution and degeneration with respect to these native issues.

The tribal society, as Arnold Van Gennep says about, is divided into several areas enclosed; each of them, within clear boundaries, and the life of every individual is marked by continuous transitions from one space to another and, therefore, from a condition to another. The rites of passage, identifiable even in the practice of body engraving, are ceremonial mechanisms that determine these passages.

The rite of passage, then, emerges as a departure from a previous condition, followed by a period of marginality and a subsequent aggregation and identification in their community.\(^5\) There is no fail to see the religious aspects, as well as social ones, of such

---

\(^1\) P. SINGER, *Ripensare la vita. La vecchia morale non serve più*, S. Rini (trans.), il Saggiatore, Milano 1996.

\(^2\) M. GIAMPA-V. NANNI, *Stigma, tatan, tatuaggi... la pelle che parla nei secoli*, on [http://www.accademia-lancisiana.it/giampa_31_marzo_09.htm](http://www.accademia-lancisiana.it/giampa_31_marzo_09.htm) [August 2013].


practices which significantly characterize numerous rites of initiation or entrance to the community, particularly in the great monotheistic religions Mediterranean.

Of course, this kind of "sight" makes it possible to recognize the status of beauty and art in such practices, apparently only initiation or epidermal ones, in order to enter a peculiar circuit of "salvation" of the body beauty and, therefore, it involves the need of having to provide a "symbolic reason", a reason of which only the human person is able to set up. Only this reason, in fact, has native claims of not-finality, of temporariness, or, at least, of truth until otherwise proven and, in all likelihood, will inevitably be conducted in the atmospheres of hermeneutic procedures, of invoking and suggesting rather than of explicitly saying.

It is not secondary also remembering that, in primitive societies, the tattoo was also taking an aesthetic function as a form of beautification of a people. It is here that to the tattoo is attributed the sense of what would later become the modern make-up and refer to that wide problematic of the mask, understood as that which, together, creates the face and gives its social being, but it could also betray the deep veracity, entrusted to a masking. Nor it is already useless to observe here that, among the possible Western origins of the use of the term of person in the legal and philosophical-religious fields, there are those who think, therefore, to theatrical influences of the term, in the sense that it would be attributable to the mask of the Roman theater, whose facial features allowed the viewer to identify immediately the staged "character".

The face, as ethno-anthropological studies continue, before being covered with complex patterns, from the root of the hair to the chin and from one ear to the other, was carefully studied by the archaic "tattoo artist". Only to the elders of the community, the task of deciding whether the drawing, previously identified, respected the true "personality" of the individual was given. In this way, the aesthetic aspects are correlated to those we call "ontological" in the Western culture, to indicate the correspondence, or less, of what is manifested and it is shown on the outside, through the embellishments of the body, compared to what, in the deep, you are.

On his side, Claude Lévi-Strauss, in his work Structural Anthropology, argued already that in some ancient ethnic groups, such as between the Guaicuru and Maori, the face is preordained to the decoration. It is through the decoration that the face receives its dignity and its mystical sense. The tattoo is, in this view, more than one design in the flesh; it is in fact also in the spirit because it holds the whole story and the knowledge of the population. The decoration, in those peoples, is designed for the face because it is only through the ornament that the face exists. In cultures identified by Levi Strauss, the masks

---

clarify, in short, the relationship between the splitting of the representation and the masking.

The purpose of the anthropological reconnaissance is, in any case, the structuring of some intermediate forms, which ensure the transition from the symbol to the meaning. Therefore they have a dual function: masking and unmasking. The double portrait of the face, created by the Maori and Caduveo, is a split, which originates in the depths: the one of the biological individual and the one of the social character that should be embodied. The sign-tattoo of the face, therefore, takes on a meaning not based on the drawn element, but compared to the internal opposition-complementarity that exists between the two carved or painted sides of the face.

Do not forget, although in other contexts and places, with a deeper psychological and anthropological content, as also Carl G. Jung emphasized, that is the person is a mask worn by the individual to meet the needs of the social conventions. It then becomes the instrument through which the subject assumes the function that is assigned him by the company and it has to perform. In this case, the person is functional to the adaptation of the man in the society. According to Jung, however, when the person puts to rest the ego, you run the risk of a complete flattening of his being to the support of a perpetuation of the social role.

### 3. Masks and forms of adaptation to the world

It is clear that, in this light, even certain dialectical tensions between theoreticians of the body, now apparent as the subject of rights now as a subject of desire, or as the subject of rights of the single individual and the privacy and now, however, as the crusader for the universal recognition, with as many different possible scenarios, relative to the privacy and the public. In this way, the same masks become possible roles and camouflages the body subject consciously assumes to adapt to the world.

At the same time physical cover of the inner emptiness and, together, self-defense and containment of the effervescent deep inner world, the mask, configured almost like a veil of Maya, who asks to be drilled, rather than masking of subjectivity becomes, in this way, shield and defense of their veracity against possible attacks, to your inner self, coming from outside. Almost in a game between the outside and the inside, the mask ends, however, to be attached to the character is a whole with its body, it is its face, the mask is

---


now itself, it is its personality, and it is not a man but a role.

In this way, the approach in the philosophy of the symbolic forms applied to the body modifications and mask, integrating with the conclusions of the cultural and social anthropology, allows you to bring to the light the important dialectic between person and personality, between subjectivity that it is and subjectivity "that is played" through the different roles played by its own, or its mask. So we can better understand the partial eclipse of the person, which many complain, for the benefit of its phenomenal, accidental, physical and material aspects.

It is not only a problem of the anthropological world, but also political, indeed biopolitical only when you consider how other structures of "governmentality" responsible institutionally for the training and education, look worried today, in real terms of emergency, to the formal education situation of human subjects, individuals and associates. It complains, in fact, that, in our cities and in our families and school contexts, overbearing phenomena of "depersonalization" are becoming popular, as well as, of loss of identity, highlighted by the shifting re-configuration of your skin and your body, and also supported from theories that believe constitutively moving and "liquid" every ontological structure, with the loss of any postponement to reference "stable structures" for the individual, the subject, the groups and the societies. In short, we would be put in a position to grasp the symbolic importance of the mask, like any other form of body modification, but in terms of the dialectic being/showing, having on/ taking off the veil, the deep subjectivity / the family and social roles played by subject.

Moreover, the reversal of the roles between the mask and the wearer, as you can see in the primitive rites and ceremonies, is restricted to the time when the mask is worn. The mask is, in fact, with many repercussions of such mythical-religious, is seen as the real appearance of represented mythical being, even if the wearer knows that it is an artifact of the man and that a man is wearing it. In primitive societies, moreover, a man, who masquerades himself, tends to identify with what the worn mask symbolizes\textsuperscript{11}. The identification extends also itself to behaviors related to the mask, so as becoming prevalent in relation to the behaviors that normally characterize the person who wears it. Then, if the individual lays the mask that modern society has imposed him and that he had initially accepted, it loses its role in the society and he is deprived of his personality.

### 4. The body as a memory

In any case, the mask, albeit involving a modification of the body, is added to it and it does not replace, nor, in fact, denatures it. Instead the actual re-articulations of being body deeper seem going, which belong to the family of tattoos, or sometimes tearing of the body. The tattoo as permanent artificial alteration of the skin requires, in particular among

\textsuperscript{11} J. Campbell, Mitologia primitiva. Le maschere di Dio, Mondadori, Milano 1990, 35.
the Oriental people, but now even in our Occident, the use of printmaking techniques rather painful, especially when, more than tattoos, other alterations are practiced.

The possible pain, however, does not represent a reason that leads to desist from getting a tattoo or a piercing. In contrast, in the Occident, where the used practice excludes more and more every form of suffering, the absence of pain is considered a essential loss, because the pain could be the element that confirms the importance of what you are doing. The pain became, in fact, in the stories of several oriental men, the memory of the event, which takes place through the body.

Not only that. The pain makes us aware that the incision in the skin of a tattoo changes our body and determines an evolution in our individuality, which marks the transition from one phase to another. Rereading it in terms of the phenomenology of the symbolic forms, or even of the symbolic hermeneutics, the body is as given to the practice of becoming. The pain of the body, therefore, becomes an important component of a moment of transformation. It would, in fact, explore ex novo its own self and it is the basis to find the self-attention to own body and, therefore, its own identity.

The marks on the body, the pain eventually chosen and desired, the introduction of piercings in various parts of the body, acquire in the actuality the function of regaining possession of the body, taking it away from the social control role played by the culture and the medicine, the , institutional religion, from the family. The pursued models, established by the institutions, are perceived by the individuals as inhibiting the individual personality and the changes that combine pleasure and pain are used to feel again a body, which would otherwise appear as 'unrelated'.

5. The body as a message

How is it possible that in a complex, hectic and precarious society, as the actual one, the individuals feel the need to leave indelible marks on their skin? An opinion, on which many behavioral scientists agree, shows that the tattoo today performs the same functions as it had in the traditional societies, although redesigned according to current cultural codes. The tattoo is, therefore, used to beautify, to communicate, to belong to a group, to exorcize the fears, in order to qualify in an original and unrepeatable way already according to the first natural habit, which is own skin.

Not only that. What emerges from a series of studies conducted on adolescents, is that the very high likelihood of whom want a tattoo is a desire to stand out from other peers, i.e. the need to reaffirm the images through the own diversity, its uniqueness compared to the mass but also, sometimes, to become more attractive.
The intention of teenagers and people in search of an identity, it is also to give a positive self-image. And the skin provides one of the most important supports to build a sense of personal identity. In a society where social differences have become less tangible, the tattoo helps to recognize themselves as part of a group, and has also preserved a more powerful meaning in being able to express the body inner self.

If the things actually were so, we would be facing one of the most obvious signs of an emergency cultural, anthropological and ethical, under which the entire consumer society would perhaps be falling. An Emergency exists not only in the community, or in its sub-youth culture, but in the same civil community. But kids today tattoo themselves for nonconformity, refusal of approval, rebellion. Not only that. Among the reasons there is a new one: the long process that led towards globalization has made inevitable the exposure to customs and traditions of a multicultural society. The originality of new lifestyles, indirectly feeds the transgressive temptation, particularly tangible in adolescence.

Erik Erikson argues that the construction of the identity is the path that leads to the understanding and the acceptance of self. Showing to the world that realization, adorning your body with a tattoo or a piercing, underlines the importance of this goal. If, instead, on the skin the desire of a dreamed identity manifests, the choice of tattoo can become dangerous. It is likely that the daily representation of themselves on the stage of life is merely limited to a reproduction of lifestyles of others, without any reconstruction of self. Decorating your body with a message that is not felt, it is not functional to the growth of the personality, but to its annihilation. An example is represented by the women who tattooed a Marilyn Monroe’ icon, hoping to look like or to arrogate some peculiar characteristics.

What would it happen if in the years when a teenager is developing his identity, so we are talking about a period of flux, one of the many tattoos marked on the skin, does not represent any more what the guy feels belonging?

It would start, in many cases, a process, still long and difficult, despite the new techniques for the removal of the tattoo. This means putting one's body to an additional stress, a new change to his structure and additional risks relating to the health. Tattoos and piercings produce continuous changes to the appearance to which we must then get used to. A new self-image is not always easy to accept, especially when the body decorations are made only for reasons of fashion and without a deep desire to communicate yourself to the others. If, on the one hand, new virtually pain free techniques for tattooing gave birth, even in those who were particularly frightened, the desire to "prove" what it meant to "wear" a tattoo, reducing to a phenomenon of usage, on the other hand, most likely, the exclusion of pain led to the elimination of three crucial moments: the memory of the event, the awareness of a change in the body and the evolution of individuality.

Reducing everything to a liquid event, one of the many moments without a reason. In

this sense, the practice of tattooing becomes a sign of the wider crisis of the modern society, which has been significantly defined liquid, even in its new fears\textsuperscript{15}.

### 6. Medical-ethical aspects of the re-configurations of the body

We continue to fear sudden damage to health, and not just the skin, especially in the most extreme cases and not controlled by the medical point of view of the body modifications. There are not so few, indeed, potential diseases brought by body piercing and tattoo. And the causes\textsuperscript{16}, after several years, are still the same: failure of observing the rules of hygiene required by the operator of the body art and geographical spread of the involved germs. In particular, infections currently contractible through piercing and tattoos can be distinguished in viral, bacterial, fungal and protozoan\textsuperscript{17}. They are always infections transmitted by blood. The most dangerous ones are definitely the viral ones and HIV, with possible permanent disabilities or serious consequences. The absence of the rules of preventive hygiene in the practice of body art can also cause infections by fungi and protozoa.

In addition, they are more and more frequent the occurrence of local skin reactions. Usually these reactions are caused by the use of the pigment of red, mercury-based, green that contains chromium, and blue, obtained with cobalt. Many of these risks undoubtedly arise from lack of professionalism of the operator, as well as by the lack of critical sense of the customer. Nevertheless, the body art is not yet sufficiently and uniformly regulated at the international level. This is more alarming when you consider the wide extent of the phenomenon. But is it only a matter of imposition by a law?

It is necessary that, in addition to the establishing of a constant health monitoring for operators and various body art salons, through specific authorities, starting an education and information activity that outlines the many risks involved in the true fashion of the tattoo. Kids need to know and understand that when you decide to get a tattoo, you must do so with full awareness of the serious dangers that exist. An education can be said to be effective when it makes responsible and independent.

Ultimately, is it justified speaking of risk behavior in the case of piercing and other interventions on the body? Yes, if the risk behavior is the set of behaviors that endanger both short- and long-term physical sphere, psychological and social ones of the individual. Some young people do deviant behavior of social transgression; others using their own body as an instrument of rebellion, risk to provide irreversible damage to their health.

---


\textsuperscript{16} See C. \textsc{Xodo} (ed.), \textit{Oltre il segno. Piercing e tatuaggi negli adolescenti}.

\textsuperscript{17} L. \textsc{Cegolon}, \textit{Body art e rischi etico-sanitari}, in \textit{Psicologia contemporanea} 223 (2011), 8.
Among these behaviors we can also include the manipulation of the body during adolescence, which may be the subject of a bioethical reflection if they are included in the discussion of the risk behavior in the adolescence.

### 7. Conclusions

The approach, even in the cases of diseases or health risks, cannot be limited to the medical field, nor resolved through mere legislative solutions. The same National Committee for Bioethics, addressing the issue of cosmetic and reconstructive surgery\(^\text{18}\), while excluding the discussion of the activities of tattooing and piercing, as well as the body art and carnal art, however, insists deeply on the «body as subjectivity, ‘lived’ body, that is what we are, and carries with it the signs of what we were: it is the body where are written the passing years, which bears the traces of our emotions, which have marked and still mark our existence. In this sense, our identity is always the identity of embodied beings»\(^\text{19}\). It is in this light that the new pedagogical and bioethical reflections that move so many teenagers and young people, and not only to appeal, often drawing on ancient practices, new practices of beautification of your body have to be understood. They appeal to them not only for attenuating unresolved tensions and problems, but also for establishing new forms of inter-generational and intra-generational communication. In this way, the modified body language expresses the needs and enters into relationship with the social context, requesting interpretations, not moralistic judgments or health awareness campaigns\(^\text{20}\).

---


\(^\text{19}\) See CNB, *Aspetti bioetici della chirurgia estetica e ricostruttiva (Parere del 21.6.2012).*

References

L. ALFIERI, La stanchezza di Marte. Variazioni sul tema della guerra, Morlacchi, Perugia 2008;
D. ANZIEU, L’Io-pelle, Borla, Roma 1987;
Z. BAUMAN, Paura liquida, M. Cupellaro (trans.), GLF editori Laterza, Roma-Bari 2010;
- Modernità liquida, S. Minucci (trans.), GLF editori Laterza, Roma- Bari 2012;
- Uguali e diversi nella società liquida, C. Bordoni (ed.), Aliberti, Roma 2013;
J. CAMPBELL, Mitologia primitiva. Le maschere di Dio, Mondadori, Milano 1990;
L. CEGOLON, Body art e rischi etico-sanitari, in Psychologia contemporanea, 223 (2011), 8-9;
E. CERULLI, Vestirsi spogliarsi travestirsi, Sellerio Editore, Palermo 1999;
COMMUNAUTE DES UNIVERSITES MEDITERRANEENS, La personne humaine face au droit dans les Pays Méditerranéens, Septembre 1993, Université Saint-Esprit, Kaslik (Liban) 1994;
M. GIAMPÀ-V. NANNI, Stigma, tatan, tatuaggi... la pelle che parla nei secoli, http://www.accademia-lancisiana.it/giampa_31_marzo_09.htm
C. G. JUNG, La struttura dell’inconscio, in Opere, vol. 7, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 1993;
B. LAI SHAHI, Piercing the Veil of Maya the Creator of All-Pervasive Illusion, in Journal of Religion & Psychical Research, 1 (2006);
C. LÉVI-STRAUSS, Antropologia strutturale, P. Caruso (trans.), il Saggiatore, Milano 2009;
B. MARENKO, Segni indelebili. Materia e desiderio del corpo tatuato, Feltrinelli, Milano 2002;
R. PARIS, La maschera nel teatro antico, De Luca edizioni d'arte, Roma 1990;
L. SCILLITANI, Dimensioni della giuridicità nell'antropologia strutturale di Lévi-Strauss, A. Giuffrè, Milano 1994;
P. SINGER, Ripensare la vita. La vecchia morale non serve più, S. Rini (trans.), il Saggiatore, Milano 1996;
A. VAN GENNEP, I riti di passaggio, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2007;
C. XODO (ed.), Oltre il segno. Piercing e tatuaggi negli adolescenti. FrancoAngeli, Milano 2010;