What am I now?
A Psychoanalytic Investigation of Tattooing

Hugh J. Jarrett

The thesis is submitted to the Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) for the degree of MA in Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy from Dublin Business School, School of Arts.

Submission: July 2015

Supervisor: Ms. Terry Ball
# Table of contents:

Acknowledgments ........................................................................................................ p 3

Abstract ......................................................................................................................... p 4

Introduction .................................................................................................................. p 5

Chapter I: The tattoo as a mark of the group ................................................................. p 6

Chapter II: The tattoo and the psychoanalytic body ...................................................... p 14

Chapter III: The tattoo and the gaze ......................................................................... p 22

Chapter IV: The ‘tattoo act’ ........................................................................................ p 30

Conclusion ..................................................................................................................... p 37

Bibliography ................................................................................................................ p 39
Acknowledgments

To begin, I would like to thank Ms. Terry Ball for all her help, comments and critique in the writing of this paper, and in my final year of the MA. I found both to be interesting, thought provoking and valuable experiences, and I am grateful to have had the opportunity to work with someone who is truly dedicated to the transmission of psychoanalysis. I would also like to thank the rest of the lecturing staff at the department of psychoanalysis in DBS and Dr. Barry O’Donnell who, through stimulating classes and coursework, provided me with the rewarding and, ultimately, ‘unsettling’ experience required to begin a psychoanalytic formation.

I would like to thank especially my parents, and all my family, for their support over the past few years and for believing in me at times when I wasn’t so sure! I would like to thank particularly my mother for reading (and re-reading) this paper and the many other papers I have written while at DBS, and for her comments and suggestions throughout. Finally, I would like to acknowledge and thank all of my classmates. I don’t know if I could have, or would have, completed the course or this paper without their help and support, or the laughter and stimulating conversation that accompanied it.

As always, this paper is dedicated to my daughter Lily.
Abstract

This paper interrogates the practice of tattooing using a number of psychoanalytic concepts to determine some of the reasons why a subject may choose to become ‘tattooed’, and what some of the psychical consequences of this act are. In chapter one the history, roles and origins of tattooing will be discussed, in relation to Freud’s work on Group Psychology (1921) and Totem and Taboo (1913), to show how the tattoo was used by many cultures as ‘a mark’, something that provided a visual demonstration of the subject’s relationship with the tribe or their ‘totem clan’, their personal history, and their allegiance to ‘the leader’. As tattooing is a practice that takes place on the body, ‘the body’ as it is conceived of by psychoanalysis, and particularly by Freud (1905), will be discussed in the second chapter, to draw out the psychosexual nature of the practice and the fact that subject’s experience a sort of ‘satisfaction’ by being tattooed. Another aspect of this practice which the first two chapters touch upon, is that of the gaze and the meaning of the tattoo in relation to the Other, the social bond, so in chapter three the relation of the tattoo to the ‘the look’ and ‘the gaze’ as theorised by Lacan (1963) will be discussed using particular examples. Finally, as the tattoo is an act that takes place upon the body which, as is noted in the previous three chapters, attempts to achieve a psychical satisfaction using the real of the body, this paper will discuss whether the act of being tattooed is an acting out (agieren) or a passage a l’acte, with particular reference to Lacan’s (1963; 1971) analysis of Freud’s paper of the young homosexual woman (1920).
Introduction

This paper will investigate ‘the tattoo’ from a psychoanalytic perspective to ascertain why this practice, which was so widespread and popular in ancient times and is now undergoing ‘a renaissance’ (DeMello, 2000) in the contemporary world, can have a particular psychical effect on the subject. While the psychoanalytic literature on the subject is somewhat scant, what has been written on the topic makes little reference to Freud or Lacan, so this study will attempt to answer some of the questions that ‘the tattoo’ provokes with reference to their work, such as: why did ancient groups feel the need to tattoo themselves with arbitrary and idiosyncratic symbols initially? Or, how does the tattoo make use of the psychosexual body that Freud theorised? Who is the tattoo ‘for’, is it a mark of the subject or of the group? Where is the ‘tattoo act’ to be positioned, in regards to the subject, the Other, the transference, etc., in the clinical picture?

In chapter one the history and anthropology of tattooing will be touched on, with reference to Freud’s work on groups (1921) and totem and taboo (1913), to establish the initial ‘necessary’ inclusion of the tattoo in group dynamics. It will be shown that these tribes went to such lengths for a number of reasons, e.g. it showed the subject’s dedication and commitment to the totem group and the tattoo was ‘the price they had to pay’ to be a member.

As tattooing is a practice that takes place on the body, ‘the body’ as it is conceived of by psychoanalysis, and particularly by Freud (1905), will be discussed in the second chapter, to draw out the psychosexual nature of the practice and the fact that subject’s experience a sort of ‘satisfaction’ by being tattooed. This is related to the erotogenic masochism inherent in the body, theorised by Freud (1924), and may go some way towards explaining why many people are repeatedly tattooed.

Another aspect of this practice which the first two chapters touch upon, is that of the gaze and the meaning of the tattoo in relation to the Other, the social bond, so in chapter three the relation of the tattoo to the ‘the look’ and ‘the gaze’ as theorised by Lacan (1963) will be discussed using particular examples to show that the subject attempts to control or ‘trap’ the gaze.

In the final chapter, the tattoo as an act that takes place upon the body, which attempts to achieve psychical satisfaction using ‘the real’ of the body, will be discussed to ascertain whether the act of being tattooed is an acting out (agieren) or a passage a l’acte. It will be shown that most ‘tattoo acts’ take place within the field of acting out, i.e. the subject tries to combine the imaginary and symbolic in an attempt to ‘say something’. However, since the tattoo makes use of the real materiality of the body, it can be used in the passage a l’acte.
Chapter I: The tattoo as a mark of the group

Tattoos…they’re pretty damn useless. But every once in a while, they come in kinda handy.

Mike (Rollo) Malone, Tattooist (1942-2007)

In 1777 ‘tattoo’ was defined as ‘an indelible mark or figure fixed upon the body by insertion of pigment under the skin or by the production of scars’ (Webster’s Dictionary). Although the definition of tattooing is only 250 years old, it is a practice that has probably existed since the early stages of the Neolithic period when people began to decorate pots, bowls, cave walls and other objects (Lobell & Powell, 2013, p41). For thousands of years people practised various forms of tattooing and scarification, not only to beautify themselves or mark significant life achievements, but also to please or seek protection from spirits that they felt inhabited the world (Gell, 1993).

History/anthropology of tattoos

The history of tattooing is possibly as old as human civilization itself, even though the common belief is that it was introduced to Europe during ‘the age of exploration’, either through the Atlantic voyages of the sixteenth century or through the voyages of Captain Cook two centuries later, after being ‘created’ in some exotic place in the South Seas (Caplan, 2000). Instead what has been gradually uncovered, through the finding of mummies and other artefacts, are remnants of this ancient world of tattooing. The most famous example of this is Otzi, ‘the iceman’, who was discovered in the French Alps at the end of the twentieth century. Otzi had a collection of crosses, lines and dots tattooed all over his body, centred on acupuncture points which wouldn’t be ‘discovered’ for another 2,000 years. After a post mortem was completed, the physicians agreed that many of the marks on Otzi’s body were at particular problematic arthritic spots, i.e. his ankles and knees, which demonstrate that the tattoos were used even at this early stage to deal with the real of the body, i.e. its problematic nature. Other tattooed mummies that have been uncovered, e.g. a Scythian horseman and some Egyptian mummies, have shown that tattoos performed a more decorative function, and were related to nobility (Gustafson, 2000). What the literature does show is that tattooing has been variously used to mark outlaws and nobles, insiders and outsiders, slaves and soldiers, at different times and in different places, and that it always has a general (cultural) and specific (subjective) context.
The tattoos of the ancients

On the European continent, tattooing was used extensively outside of the Greco-Roman world to show tribal allegiance, nobility and to denote difference between the various clans, countries, religions, etc. In the Greco-Roman world however, tattoos were used to mark criminals and were used as a form of punishment, e.g. to mark someone as a criminal, a runaway slave or a vanquished enemy (Gustafson, 2000). According to Heroditus, the Greeks had imported the custom from Persia sometime in the sixth century BC. Unlike the many other cultures that populated the European continent at the time, where tattoos were worn as mark of pride, in Greece and Rome tattoos were used exclusively “for property and penal purposes” (Caplan, 2000, p44). The spread of these cultures over the continent would establish a particular distinction between the ‘high-culture’ of Greece and Rome and the ‘barbarism’ of their neighbours, of which tattooing was a traditional practice. At times, and in certain groups, this meaning was inverted, e.g. the early Christians who, upon completing a pilgrimage to the Holy Land would receive a small cross to mark their religious observance (Jones, 2000). But overall, the influence of Christianity in Europe further emphasised the distinction between ‘the body made in God’s image’ and the ‘barbaric’ ‘pagan’ traditions of mutilating the body.

The influence of Christianity, the successor to the Greco-Roman empire, in the west was mirrored in the east with the spread of Confucianism, which had a massive and detrimental impact on the tattooing culture of Japan. Tattooing had been an integral part of society since the Jomon period (10,000 BC – 300 AD) in Japan, where tattoos were used as spiritual, ornamental, and cosmetic enhancements to the natural body (McCallum, 1988). However, as the elite of central Japan, much like the Chinese before them, began to view the still tattooed easterners as ‘barbarians’ because of their tattooing practices, tattoos began to assume negative connotations in Japan. Tattoos were seen as marks of an earlier time, ‘an uncivilised past’, that were not part of the ‘future Japan’, with its new Confucian values. Around this time tattoos began to be used as a form of punishment, the subject would be given a highly visible mark that would signify their crime (McCallum, 1988). In this way tattoos lost their religious, spiritual and tribal connotations but retained their ability to mark social status or rank. Obviously, with marks on their faces or hands, tattooed criminals were easily identified at city gates and were branded to let everyone know what crimes they had committed.
The tattoos of Polynesia

While it is difficult to piece together the evidence of what tattooing culture may have been like in earlier 'prehistoric' times, one way to achieve this is to look at those cultures where tattooing has consistently been an integral part of the dominant culture. One such place is in Oceania, the vast realm of the Pacific Ocean. Here tattooing flourished under the influence and ancestors of the Lapitas. These ‘Vikings of the Pacific’ (Krutak, 2010) originated in Southeast Asia and by 1500 BC had occupied Polynesia. Their ancestors would go on to introduce their culture to the whole realm of Oceania eventually conquering New Zealand in 900 AD (Krutak, 2010; Gell, 1993). Because of the vast scale of Oceania, as well as the relative isolation of each of the islands, each of these cultures developed distinct local traditions, however tattooing remained one of the cornerstones of each culture; “once they settled themselves into the remote archipelagos of the great South Sea they began to develop their own distinctive cultures and practices like tattooing in concert with the expansive geography that enveloped them” (Krutak, 2010, p2). Through the voyages of the Lapita there developed basically similar cultural elements, e.g. ancestor worship, the presence of a universal power in all things animate or inanimate (Polynesia – mana, Micronesia – debbo), and a belief in the divine origins of certain cultural practices like tattooing (Gell, 1993).

Tattooing is found throughout Oceania but, as noted above, what started as a common basic theme developed into a bewildering diversity of styles, patterns, and motifs, which makes it difficult at first glance to recognise any particular form as recurrent or ‘basic’ to the practice of tattooing as a whole. However, a closer inspection of the mythology surrounding the origins of tattooing reveals two common themes: that most of the designs come from the natural world, and that tattooing was a gift from the Gods. According to the research undertaken by Krutak (2010), Lewoj and Lanij, the sons of the creator god Lowa (who shaped and named the islands, and moved them into the ocean) told the people that they must “paint the fish, colour the birds; create special drawings on the lizard, the rat” (ibid, p2). And then when the people had tattooed, eo, all of the living creatures, Lewoj and Lanij told the people “you must become tattooed so that you are beautiful, and that your skin does not shrink with age […] everything will pass after death, only the tattoo will remain, they will outlive you. A human life will leave all and everything on earth […] only the tattoo will be taken to the grave” (ibid, p2). This order from the Gods, to become beautiful like the animals, shows their attempt to become one with the world that they lived in, possibly to deal with the anxiety brought about by living in a turbulent world.
“The fine blackwork matched the darkness of the sea and the feathers of seabirds like the black noddy and the frigate. Intricate curved lines mimicked the striped patterns of the Regal Angelfish that was called *eo* or ‘tattooed’. Hexagonal fields symbolised the turtle’s carapace, rows of triangles shark’s teeth, branching lines crab’s legs [...] and many other motifs [...] relating to the seafaring nature of these Argonauts of the Western Pacific” (ibid, p2).

In his anthropological analysis of Polynesian tattooing, Gell referred to the tattoo as “a double skin folded over itself” (1993, p39), which mediated the relations between people and the divine, past and present. Through tattooing “the body multiplies; additional organs and subsidiary selves are created; spirits, ancestors, rulers and victims take up residence in an integument which begins to take a life of its own” (Gell, 1993, p39). For Gell, tattooing is “simultaneously the exteriorization of the interior which is simultaneously the interiorization of the exterior” (ibid, p38-39).¹ That is, not only does the tattooed skin mediate between the individual and their society, as well as external groups, but it also mediates the relations between people, their ancestors and the spirit world, in psychoanalytic terminology: the symbolic order.

In his study, Gell attempts to question the meaning of tattoos by comparing societies with and without tattooing, by conducting an ‘epidemiological’ study of tattoos relating it to stratification, social relations, mythology and ideas about the sacred. What Gell finds is that there is no simple equivalency in tattooing, that tattoos create and therefore signify difference. He found that they protect ‘the self’ and, to an extent, control the sacred, his conclusion being that tattoos are “a stigma of humanity [...] To be tattooed was always, in the final analysis, to interpose a barrier between a secular self and un-mediated divinity” (ibid, p314). While the Gods were never tattooed in Polynesia, it further emphasised the fact that human reality played out on a different dimension. Some societies, such as those of the Marquesas, believed that the skins of nobles would have to be removed so that they could safely enter the afterlife. Others believed that, if the subject was missing ‘the mark of the tribe/clan’, they couldn’t enter the afterlife or, if they did, they wouldn’t be ‘recognised’ by their ancestors (Krutak, 2010).

¹ Gell’s description is uncannily similar to the concept of the Moebius strip and torus, which Lacan uses to speak about the body and will be discussed later.
Group psychology (1921)

The full title of Freud’s 1921 paper is *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, which demonstrates that, from the outset, the psyche of the subject is intimately related to the dynamics of the group. In his paper Freud argues that, as soon as human beings are gathered together their individual ego is dissolved in the group and instead what comes to the fore is their unconscious. The subject feels themselves part of the ‘invincible power’ of the group and loses all sense of responsibility and their moral conscientiousness, they possess “the spontaneity, the violence, the ferocity, and also the enthusiasm and heroism of primitive beings” (Freud, 1921, p77). Freud also notes how there can be a sort of ‘contagion’, which can lead the subject to sacrifice themselves and their own personal interest quite readily, to that of the group. Here it could be noted that the tattoo signified this sacrifice of the body to the group. “What it demands of its heroes is strength, or even violence. It wants to be ruled and oppressed and to fear its masters. Fundamentally, it is entirely conservative, and it has a deep aversion to all innovations and advances and has an unbounded respect for tradition” (Ibid, p78-79).

Here, it can be noted that tattoos at their simplest are visual indicators of a particular discourse of the group, that of the dominant culture with its own specific symbolic matrix which the subject will be born into and have to negotiate throughout their life. In his paper, Freud argues that what brings together the group, as a collection of individuals is the belief that the leader of the group loves them all equally, and that this love is what holds them all together thereafter. His use of the term ‘love’ was meant in its widest sense, i.e. the *Eros* of Plato, and he related this love to the psychoanalytic theory of the libido and the drives. The belief that all of the members of a group are loved equally by the leader is a delusion that is fundamental to the cohesion of the group, “everything depends on this delusion; if it were dropped, then [the group] would dissolve, so far as the external force permitted them to” (ibid, p94).

“[E]ach individual is bounded by libidinal ties on the one hand to the leader and on the other hand to the members of the group” (Freud, 1921, p95). What is important to note here is that the tattoo was means by which the subject could display their ‘libidinal ties’ to the group. By visually representing the subject, the tattoos served as a constant reminder, a mark, that showed the subject had ‘incorporated’ the group, internalised its history and demonstrates their willingness to take part in it. An important part of which is the subject’s identification with the leader, the culture and, as discussed below, the totem. A culture where this is especially clear is that of the Native Americans who worshipped a great sky deity
called ‘the Birdman’ who changed night into day and back again. Tattoos associated with the Birdman were related to the concept of sight or ‘vision’, and imbued the wearer with the ability ‘to see like the Birdman’ (Dass, 2009). This sight was then attributed to them by the other members of the group so the tattoo marked a very particular change in the subject’s relation to the group, i.e. they were an authority, and to themselves. They became a member of significant value to the group, psychoanalytically speaking, because they were a ‘subject-supposed-to-know’. Birdman tattoos, like most tribe/clan tattoos, had to be ‘earned’ in battle, by showing keen judgement in political matters or by hunting with great prowess (Dass, 2009). So the subsequent mark showed their value to the group and also made it clear to the subject that a qualitative change has taken place, i.e. they are not the same individual as they were before they got their Birdman tattoos, symbolically, imaginarily and in the real of the body. As will be noted below, the tattoo itself played an important role in many societies throughout history, probably in part, because it was able to combine these three registers and hold them together.

**Totem and Taboo (1913)**

Almost a decade before his work on groups, Freud had made a psychoanalytic contribution to anthropology with his work *Totem and Taboo* (1913), which investigated the totemic cultures of “savages” which he considered to be the “direct heirs and representatives” of prehistoric man in order to shed some light on the origins of civilization, religion and morality (Freud, 1913, p53). What it will add to this discussion is an answer to the question of why these cultures made use of tattooing and why the felt it was necessary to go to such lengths to permanently mark the body with the sign of the clan/tribe.

A totem is “as a rule an animal (whether edible and harmless or dangerous and feared) and more rarely a plant or a natural phenomenon (such as rain or wind), which stands in a particular relation to the whole clan” (Freud, 1913, p54). This totem is believed to be the common ancestor of the clan who, in the afterlife, acts like a guardian spirit or helper. This protection comes with a price and the clansmen are “under a sacred obligation (subject to automatic sanctions) not to kill or destroy their totem and to avoid eating its flesh (or deriving benefit from it in other ways)” (ibid, p55). To do so would be taboo. The word *taboo*, like *ta-tau,* is a Polynesian word that is difficult to translate because “the concept denoted by it is one which we no longer possess” (ibid, p71). Its meaning goes in two directions, it means

---

2 The origin of the word tattoo.
‘sacred’ and ‘consecrated’ but at the same time ‘uncanny’, ‘dangerous’ and ‘forbidden’. Freud notes that the opposite to taboo is noa, a word that means ‘common’ or ‘generally accessible’. So the taboo is something ‘unapproachable’ that can only be expressed in restrictions and prohibitions. “Taboo prohibitions have no grounds and are of unknown origin” (ibid, p71) and differ from moral or religious prohibitions in that they “impose themselves of their own account” (ibid, p71), and don’t differ to a higher authority than the clan. Or to put it another way, they don’t fall into any system that “declares quite generally that certain abstinences must be observed and gives reasons for that necessity” (ibid, p71), instead it is just so because the clan says so.

Freud’s investigation leads him to a hypothesis, that of “the primal horde” (Freud, 1913). In this ‘primal horde’ the father was a tyrant who kept all of the women in the group for his own pleasure and banished his sons to the wilderness and death. These banished men grouped together in ‘a band of brothers’ and overthrew the father, killed him and ate his body in the process. They then shared the women between themselves and were overcome by guilt over their crime, and created rules/prohibitions so as to make sure that the crime wasn’t repeated (by their sons). So the two rules of the totem related to these two first rules of the ‘band of brothers’, i.e. the outlawing of murder and incest. This crime which was the first to be outlawed, what Freud would call ‘the primal crime’, was what he believed was at the root of all civilization, and is played out in each subject’s psyche during the Oedipus complex. As Freud notes, “a link between totemism and exogamy exists and is clearly a very firm one” (Freud, 1913, p56).

It could be theorised that tattoos got some of their importance from this requirement of having to conform to the group norms and also the need to distinguish each family, tribe and clan from one another – so that nobody could ever be mistaken about another’s identity because the marks were permanent. The tattoos were applied using a specific but arbitrary framework, which was developed by each tribe/clan, and, because of this, they had a definite symbolic structuring effect on the subject and for the group, i.e. cohesion. That is, the tattoos had a determining effect on the subject’s position in regards to the group and its dynamics. The tattoo spelt out, in images, the subject’s family, their position in the clan’s hierarchy, and “their relationship to the gods” (e.g. Gell, 1993), i.e. the subject’s relationship to mana.

Freud notes that the source of taboo is attributed to mana, “a peculiar magical power which is inherent in persons and spirits and can be conveyed by them through the medium of inanimate objects” (ibid, p73). To borrow Freud’s analogy, like an object charged with electricity, a person who is regarded as being taboo is like a conduit of this mana, they are
“the seat of a tremendous power which is transmissible by contact, and may be liberated with destructive effect if the organisms which provoke its discharge are too weak to resist it” (ibid, p73). The outcome of this ‘discharge’ depends on the quantity of mana present in the object being touched and the quantity of it present in the violator of the taboo, i.e. “Kings and chiefs are possessed of great power, and it is death for their subjects to address them directly” (ibid, p73). But through an intermediary, e.g. a priest or minister, a person in possession of some mana themselves, they can approach the chief or king without being harmed and have their reply conveyed back to them without risk. A ruler “must not only be guarded but must be guarded against” (Frazer, 1910, In Freud, 1913, p96). Since the chief was the vehicle of this mysterious power, as the leader, it meant that contact between the chief and the rest of the clan would have to be avoided, and if it couldn’t be some kind of ceremony would be held to mitigate the consequences, i.e. they needed something that acted like a barrier to the mana that would be ‘discharged’.

So here it can be theorised that the distinctive ‘marks’ of the chief, the visual indicators that show the rest of the clan that they are the chief, of which tattoos play an important role, help to show (and possibly mitigate) the magical power of the chief and its potential for great harm, i.e. the hands of the chief were often tattooed (referring to touch), as was his face, particularly his eyes (referring to vision)³, etc. The tattoos served as a warning that contact could lead to death and may also have been an attempt to control or harness this power so that ‘normal’ contact wouldn’t lead to death. Here it could be noted that, at its most basic level, these marks on the chief’s hands and face showed everyone that his touch and gaze was qualitatively different from the average clan member and they had to act accordingly.

³ Possibly alluding to the idea of ‘the gaze’, which will be discussed in chapter 3
Chapter II: The tattoo and the psychoanalytic body

The whole of psychoanalysis is there to demonstrate that it is the unconscious structuring of the subject that allows the ego its apparently natural relationship to an already-out-there-now real world

(Gallagher and Darby, 1994, p88)

In this chapter the body as theorised by psychoanalysis and its relationship to the tattoo will be discussed, to show how the subject’s relationship to their body is, to a certain extent, ‘un-natural’, i.e. that the subject’s relationship to their body is not a direct result of their biology, and is ‘constructed’ by the early relationship between the infant and the mOther. The result is that, like the tattoo, these encounters or experiences, and the meaning that is ascribed to them by the Other, permeate the body and have an effect on the subject’s relationship to it. To this end, Freud’s Three Essays (1905) and his paper on masochism (1924), will be discussed as they show how the development of the human subject and, consequently, their relationship to their body and the social order, the Other, help to give tattoos their significance. As will be shown, this is because tattoos make use of the erotogenic masochism inherent in the body, as well as the social libido inherent in civilization, to achieve a particular form of satisfaction. Work by Anzieu and Lacan will also be discussed as it pertains to the discussion.

The body in Freud’s work

Freud’s early work led him to the theory of infantile sexuality as he sought to understand how the psychical conflicts of his, mainly hysterical, patients were creating physical symptoms in their bodies. In his major work on sexuality, the Three Essays (1905), Freud demonstrates how human sexuality as is ‘un-natural’ because in human beings there are so many deviations in regards to the sexual aim and the sexual object. He outlines in the first essay how all subject’s act perversely in the realm of sexuality but perversion is only truly ‘pathological’ if it has the “characteristics of exclusiveness and fixation” (Freud, 1905, p161). This view is in marked contrast to the prevailing view, then and now, that human sexuality appears in puberty and is aimed at genital satisfaction with a member of the

---

4 ‘Meaning’ in psychoanalysis, as in everything else, is an extremely complex and highly theoretical area, and while it may add something to our discussion, an interrogation of it would take this study too far afield. Readers are referred to Fierens’ From One Turn to the Other (The Letter, 2013, pp 41-46). In the above text ‘meaning’ is used in its most colloquial sense.
opposite sex, and that any who don't conform to this myth are ‘deviants’ who choose to be perverted, i.e. ‘give in to base instincts’, or are mentally ill. Freud demonstrated how the human trieb was a far more complicated affair, which had its roots in the amnesia of early childhood. “The very same impressions that we have forgotten have none the less left the deepest traces on our minds and have a determining effect upon the whole of our later development” (Freud, 1905, p175).

Freud, after showing that the sexual drive or libido was made up of a number of component instincts, defined the instinct as “the psychical representative of an endosomatic, continuously flowing source of stimulation, as contrasted with a stimulus, which is set up by single excitations coming from without” (ibid, p168). As such the libido exists “on the frontier between the psychical and the physical” (ibid, p168). What distinguishes the drives from one another is their relation to their somatic source, i.e. a process of excitation occurring in an organ, and to their aim, i.e. the removal of this ‘organic stimulus’. “The sexual aim of the infantile sexual instinct consists in obtaining satisfaction by means of an appropriate stimulation of the erotogenic zone which has been selected in one way or another” (ibid, p184, my italics). The expressions ‘appropriate stimulation’ and ‘selected’ in the above quote, shows that, from an early stage, it matters to the infant whether it is rocked slowly or quickly, whether the adult talks softly, loudly or not at all, etc. It also means that the sensation sought must have been experienced before and the infant seeks a repetition of the satisfaction obtained. Here it can be seen how the subject’s singular relationship to their body is developed, to a certain extent ‘created’, by its constitution and its experiences.

At the early stages of the infant’s life sexual excitation and satisfaction ‘can be used without distinction’ because the care of the baby creates them both, “to begin with, sexual activity attaches itself to functions serving the purpose of self-preservation and does not become independent of them until later” (ibid, p182). Freud used the phrase ‘polymorphously perverse’ to describe how, at first, the infant is ‘as yet undifferentiated’ in its erotogenic zone and derives pleasure from the ‘mechanically rhythmical movements’ it receives from the mOther, as well as her smell, voice, and the pleasure inherent in feeding. It is ‘auto-erotic’, in that the infant takes its body as its sexual object and its aim is the pursuit of pleasure (lust) and the avoidance of unpleasure. However, it relies on others for its needs to be met – food.

---

5 Freud's official translator Dr. James Strachey (mis)translated the German word trieb into ‘instinct’ in the Standard Edition of Freud's works. However, subsequent commentators, specifically Laplanche and Pontalis (1973), have noted that the word trieb is derived from trieben (to push) so the expression ‘drive’ would be a more appropriate translation.

6 The German word lust, used by Freud (1905), denotes both the excitation and the satisfaction elements of pleasure.
warmth, touch – so is at this point incapable of independent existence. It also means that these primary needs of the child can only be communicated with a cry so require the interpretation of the mother. “Interpretation is not put to the test of truth that can be settled by a yes or a no, it unleashes truth as such. It is true only in so far as it is truly followed” (Lacan, 1971, 13.1.71, p7). That is, the mother’s interpretation is coloured by her own perceptions and experiences of the world, in short, it is coloured by her unconscious.

It could be said that, from this point on, the infant is subject to the worldview and the desire of the mother. Her interpretation of what the child needs/wants does not have to be perfect, just ‘good enough’ to borrow an expression from Winnicott (1953). The infant then has a stable place from which their psychosexual development can develop. What is of note for this paper is how the encounters with the mother and her interpretation of the needs/wants of the infant ‘leave their mark’ on the body of the infant in both metaphorical and material senses. And, as mentioned above, that these marks of lust that are left on the body, and will develop into the erotogenic zones, seek an ‘appropriate stimulation’ in order for the subject to achieve some form of satisfaction.

**Freud’s second drive**

Freud’s work in 1920’s, beginning with *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, and the introduction of Thanatos or the ‘Nirvana Principle’, marked a major shift in how the body was conceived of by the psychoanalytic community. In his 1924 paper on *The Economic Problem of Masochism*, he argued that the relationship between pleasure-unpleasure and tension was insufficient to describe the relation of the subject to masochism. That is, there are pleasurable tensions and unpleasureable relations of tension, so the problem is not simply about a quantity of relaxed tension, but instead has a qualitative factor, a ‘characteristic’ quality. However, Freud points out that whether this is related to a particular rhythm, the temporal sequence of changes, or the rises and falls in the quality of stimulus, “we do not know” (Freud, 1924, p160). He theorised that the Nirvana principle had evolved into the pleasure principle in animals, and that we should avoid regarding the two as one drive, but asks how did this happen? “It can only be the life instinct, the libido, which has thus, alongside the death instinct, seized upon a share in the regulation of the processes of life” (ibid, p160). From this Freud draws a number of connections: “the Nirvana principle

---

7 In fact an overly attentive or ‘perfect’ mother, one who knows our wants ‘almost before us’ would be overwhelming, and may be one of the germs of paranoia.
8 Thanatos is also known as the ‘death instinct/drive’.
expresses the trend of the death instinct; the pleasure principle represents the demands of the libido; and the modification of the latter principle, the reality principle, represents the influence of the external world” (ibid, p160). This means that the three principles can ‘tolerate’ each other’s existence and do not seek to destroy each other, but, since they each have different aims, conflicts will arise. What is important for this paper is to note that the three principles each leave their own psychical trace on the body of the infant, and have a bearing on its subsequent development.

Freud argued that the libido, which encounters Thanatos in the organism, must make Thanatos innocuous, which it achieves by directing it outwards, using the muscular body, onto the external world. “This instinct is then called the destructive instinct, the instinct for mastery, or the will to power” (ibid, p163). Part of the drive is placed directly in the service of the sexual instinct and becomes sadism as we know it. However, another part of the drive stays inside the body and becomes libidinally bound there. “It is in this portion that we have to recognise the original, erotogenic masochism” (ibid, p164). Freud points out that we do not know how this ‘taming’ of Thanatos takes place and it can only be assumed that “a very extensive fusion and amalgamation, in varying proportions, of the two classes of instincts takes place, so that we never have to deal with pure life instincts and death instincts, only with mixtures of them in different amounts” (ibid, p164). This erotogenic masochism accompanies the libido through all its developmental stages and hence has a determining effect on the subject’s relation to the world and to their body, “the true masochist always turns his cheek when he has the chance of receiving a blow” (ibid, p165). Here it can be noted that the tattoo as an act upon the body takes advantage of this erotogenic masochism inherent in the body. This may also explain why people often get more than one tattoo, as many people have articulated, ‘they’re addictive’. These subjects have, like prehistoric man before them, found this ‘pleasure in pain’ that Freud explained using his drive theory, and use it to achieve a type of satisfaction.

In his Three Essays Freud had theorised that “it may be that nothing of considerable importance can occur in the organism without contributing some component to the excitation of the sexual instinct” (Freud, 1905, p205). Following this, the excitations of unpleasure, i.e. pain, “would be bound to have the same effect too” (Freud, 1924, p163). This manifestation of the infantile physiological mechanism, which ceases to operate later on, would “attain a varying degree of development in different constitutions [...] in any case it would provide the

---

9 This primary masochism was in contrast to his idea of ‘sadism turned round on the self’ that he had postulated in the Three Essays (1905), which in this paper (1924) he called ‘secondary masochism’.
physiological foundation on which the psychical structure of erotogenic masochism would afterwards be erected” (ibid, p163). This is important for this paper as it implies that, while it varies due to subjective constitution and experience, every-body has the capacity to achieve pleasure in pain, i.e. that psychosexual pleasure is a universal and inherent part of being tattooed. It also implies that the skin, the organ of the touching/touched drive plays a significant role in this process, and for that reason will now be discussed.

The skin

“Skin is a complex affair. It cannot be taken for granted as merely organic matter, nor as a passive surface onto which social meaning is straightforwardly inscribed. As a condition of human subjectivity and a primary site of its negotiation, skin bears multiple complex pressures from both within and without and generates a range of expressions particular to persons, cultures and environments” (Cavanagh, Failler & Alpha Johnston Hurst, 2013, p2).

Our skin simultaneously connects us to and separates us from the world of objects and other people. We feel like ‘our skin is our own’ but it is continually ‘shared’ through our encounters and exchanges with other people. Its existence at/as the border or meeting place of inside–outside, and mother–baby, means it holds a privileged position in the unconscious structuring of the subject's ‘being-in-a-body’.

In his *Three Essays* (1905) Freud, implicitly and explicitly, points out that the skin plays a fundamental role in all of the stages of psychosexual development. Skin’s role is privileged both because of its origins, i.e. the ectoderm, and its position, i.e. at the surface of the body. “The skin, which in certain parts of the body has become differentiated into sense organs or modified into mucous membrane, and is thus the erotogenic zone *par excellence*” (Freud, 1905, p169). This is important to note as it demonstrates skins capacity to achieve a form of libidinal satisfaction, and its role in the ‘polymorphously perverse’ disposition of human beings. Both of these factors may have contributed to the tattoos use among early ‘tattoo communities’ who may have (literally) ‘tapped into’ this power inherent in the body unknowingly, and used it from then on:

“One of the most ancient forms in which this unreal organ [the libido] is incarnated in the body is tattooing, scarification. The tattoo certainly has the

10 During physiological development the nervous system and the skin develop out of the same substance, the ectoderm.
function of being for the Other, of situating the subject in it, marking his place in
the field of the group’s relations, between each individual and all the others. And,
at the same time, it obviously has an erotic function, which all those who have

This social and individual libido that Lacan makes note of may be an indirect reference
to Freud’s *Civilization and its Discontents* (1931). In this work, which follows on from his
paper on groups mentioned earlier, Freud shows, through an intricate analysis of the
development of the individual and the community, that one of the goals of civilization “is one
of uniting separate individuals into a community bound together by libidinal ties” (Freud,
1931, p139). Here it can be seen that the marks of the tattoo, as well as serving an erotic
function (which was mentioned above), mark a specific something for the subject. That is
they offer a physical, visibly recognisable ‘roadmap’ of the subject’s relation to the Other, as
Lacan says ‘situating the subject in it’, marking their place in the community11.

**The skin as a Moebius strip or torus**

The Moebius strip is one of the figures used by Lacan in his study on topology. It is a
three dimensional figure that can be formed by taking a long rectangle of paper and twisting
it once before joining its ends together. The result is a figure that subverts our normal
Euclidean way of representing space, i.e. it seems to have two sides but in fact has only one.
The figure illustrates the way in which various binary oppositions, such as inside–outside,
touched–touching, mother–infant, etc., can be viewed. While the two terms in such
opposition are often presented as radically distinct, Lacan prefers to understand these
oppositions in terms of the Moebius strip, which has two sides that are not discrete but
continuous with one another. The spatial metaphor of the Moebius strip is a useful metaphor
to describe how the role of the skin as a meeting point between mOther–infant, and inside–
outside. It is at the border of a very complicated process that has long term effects, because
“the body’s interior spills into the other and is exposed from the first to an outside relational
field predicated on responses of others. Likewise the skin border fails to hold fast but frays
and shifts. As an exteriorised surface, mirrored and touched, the outside forever seeps in and
the protective seal is forever breached” (Diamond, 2013, p2).

---

11 As a Lacanian could put it, tattoos are of ‘the One’ and ‘the Other’.
“The inside and the outside, in this particular case, namely, as regards the torus, are they notions of structure or form? Everything depends on the conception one has of space and I would say up to a certain point of what we highlighted as the truth of space. There is certainly a truth of space which is that of the body. In this case, the body is something which can only be founded on the truth of space, which indeed is where the sort of asymmetry that I highlight has its foundations” (Lacan, 1976-77, p29).

In his 26th seminar, *L’insu que sait de l’une bevue s’aile a mourre*, Lacan returned to the body in his discussion about the torus. Lacan notes that the body is not ‘in the truth of space’ the ‘old Klein bottle’ of the object relations school which was used to distinguish between, and separate, ‘the container’ and ‘the contained’, rather the asymmetry of the torus highlights that “this old Klein bottle has in reality that shape there [i.e. the torus]” (Lacan, 1976-77, p30). That is, instead of thinking of the body as a discrete container which can be ‘filled’ through a single entrance/exit point, it should be noted that the body is a porous substance with no fixed structure of form. For Lacan, this ‘torus-like’ nature of the body is primary.

“The distinction between the shape and the structure is important here. It is not for nothing that I have marked here something which is a torus, is a torus even though its shape does not allow this to appear. Is the shape something which lends itself to suggestion? Here is the question that I am posing, and that I pose while advancing the primacy of the structure” (ibid, p30).

**The skin ego**

Didier Anzieu (1990) argued that in Freud’s day what had been repressed was sexuality, but in today’s ‘technological age’ what was being repressed was the sensual body, the body that comes into being through the Other. Anzieu disagreed with Lacan’s approach to the body because he believed that Lacan overemphasised the role of language and the symbolic in the construction of the body, at the expense of somatic and sensory theories (Cavanagh, Failler & Alpha Johnston Hurst, 2013). He developed his theory of the ‘skin ego’ (1989) out of Freud’s theory of psychosexual development, and theorised that at this early stage the mother and child shared ‘a common skin’. Anzieu saw these primary interactions (feeding, rocking, holding, bathing) between mother and child as a meeting or fusion of two skins and theorised that the primitive ego developed out of these interactions. This ‘shared
corporeality’ also meant that, in one sense, the skin that they share can act as a conduit along which fears, pain, anxieties, etc., can travel. As the skin ego is created during the stage of primary narcissism, Anzieu theorised that this primitive ‘proto-ego’, which is based on these early interactions, was the foundation onto which later constructions would be placed.

The vignettes of skin conditions that Anzieu (1989) provides in his book, e.g. psychosomatic manifestations of eczema, psoriasis, dermatitis, etc., highlight the importance of the relationship between mother and child, specifically at the stage of primary narcissism, and show how the characteristics of this relationship can have a profound effect on the unconscious structuring of the subject, especially their existence as a ‘being-in-a-body’. According to Anzieu, when the skin ego is operating without difficulty, it provides a protective function which he names ‘a narcissistic envelope’, which provides a sense of security or a ‘solid base’. However, as can be seen in Anzieu’s vignettes, if this ‘envelope’ is damaged (through trauma) or its construction is undermined, e.g. it is marked with shame, guilt or the anxieties of the mOther, what will exist instead is ‘an envelope of suffering’ (Anzieu, 1990).

“The fact that skin, or representations of skin can signify beauty and abjection at once, or evoke attraction and repulsion simultaneously, draws attention to skins capacity to bear multiple contradictory meanings; skin doth fester and flower [...] this highlights the propensity for skin to serve as a trigger of potent, affective, even visceral, response” (Cavanagh, Failler and Alpha Johnston Hurst, 2013, p2).

The above quote shows the power that the tattoo can have because it uses the skin as its medium. It demonstrates how the tattoo can be used as an important mark of identification in the group and between its members but how it can also be used as a psychological weapon which assaults the Other’s perception of the subject’s body, and that this ‘response’ is what the subject seeks.

---

12 Anzieu rejected the Lacanian view that the ego is structured like a Moebius strip, but did think that some sort of ‘feedback loop’ existed between mother-child and inside-outside, which was regulated by the skin.
13 To steal an expression from Bowlby.
Chapter III: The tattoo and the gaze

As was noted in the last two chapters, the tattoo exists on the skin and is used as a visual mark or signifier intended to say something to someone, or everyone, so in this chapter the tattoo as an object of the gaze will be discussed as it has an important contribution to make to any psychoanalytic approach to tattooing. To this end, Lacan’s work with the gaze and, in particular, his concept of anxiety that results from the encounter with the Other’s gaze, will be discussed to further investigate the role of tattooing in the creation of a subjective ‘identity’.

From gazing to the gaze

Lacan’s first comments on the gaze appear in the first year of his seminars (1953-54), in reference to Sartre’s analysis of ‘the look’. For Sartre, the gaze is something that permits the subject to realise that the Other is also a subject: “My fundamental connection with the Other-as-subject must be able to be referred back to my permanent possibility of being seen by the Other” (Sartre, 1993, p256). This explained that when the (voyeuristic) subject is surprised by the gaze of the Other, the subject is shamed by his gaze. Initially, Lacan didn't develop his own theory of the gaze and was in general agreement with Sartre’s view (Lacan, 1988, p215).

It was only in 1964 that Lacan began to develop his own distinctive theory of the gaze. Whereas Sartre had combined the gaze with the act of looking, Lacan separated the two. The gaze became ‘the object of the act of looking’, or put another way, the object of the scopic drive, i.e. from this point on it was not on the side of the subject, but on the side of the Other. The eye, which ‘looks’, is that of the subject, while the gaze is of the Other or the object, and there can never be a coincidence between the two. “You can never look at me from the place at which I see you” (Lacan, 1998, p103). Put another way, when the subject looks at an object, the object is already gazing at the subject but from a point at which the subject cannot ‘see’ it. This split/gap between the eye and the gaze is nothing other than subjective division itself expressed in the scopic field. That is, we can never truly assume another subject’s ‘point of view’ because of our relationship to phantasy. While it is possible to empathise, through identification, we can never ‘know’ what an experience is like for another person because we lack their constitution and experiences, i.e. their unconscious structuring.

In his formulation of the gaze, Lacan appropriated Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological model of vision which identifies a fundamental reversibility inherent in
vision, the body is both a subject and an object, seeing and seen. While he uses the model, Lacan emphasises that the possibility of being observed is always primary. That is, he asserts the primacy of a ‘to-be-seen’ in relation to an internal or imagined gaze (Lacan, 1998, p74). His concept of the gaze meant that the subjectivity of the individual is determined through a gaze which places the subject ‘under observation’, causing them to experience themselves as an object that is seen.

**The gaze in art**

In his eleventh seminar Lacan discusses Hans Holbein’s *The Ambassadors* (Lacan, 1998). The painting shows two wealthy men standing either side of an ornate dresser with an odd blotch of paint at the bottom of the painting. When you look at the painting initially you feel in control of your gaze, but gradually it becomes drawn to this odd patch at the bottom of the painting. To determine what this paint actually is you have to tilt your head to the side and see that it is in fact a painting of a skull staring back at you. “By having the object of our eyes look back at us, we are reminded of our own lack, of the fact that the symbolic order is separated only by a fragile border from the materiality of the real” (Felluga, 2012, p4). In Holbein’s painting, the symbols of power and desire, i.e. the objects of wealth, science, art and ambition, evident on the dresser, are completely undercut and mean nothing when ‘looking death in the face’. As Lacan puts it, the skull “reflects our own nothingness, in the figure of the death's head” (Lacan, 1998, p92).

A number of years after his discussion on *The Ambassadors*, Lacan took up an interest in Velasquez’s *Las Meninas* (Staunton, 1998). The painting itself is, even to the scholars that Staunton makes reference to, “a riddle, a cunning trick” (Ibid, p27), something that continues to fascinate and infuriate, escapes explanation and, to the viewer, offers a ‘perplexing puzzle’ from the first. Given that, this paper will only make a fleeting reference to a very interesting painting and the subsequent discussion of it by Foucault, Lacan, and others, and readers are directed to Staunton’s (1998) excellent summary. In the foreground of the painting are the princess and her entourage, i.e. her ladies in waiting, one of whom is curtsying (to us?), a ‘little person’, a number of minders and a dog. To the left of them is Velasquez himself and the back of a painting of a portrait we cannot see directly, but is being reflected in a mirror at the end of the room. The room itself is dark and full of paintings, and at the far end a man is entering/leaving through a door which introduces a ‘paragraph of light’ to the middle of the painting. By framing the painting in such a way, Velasquez puts the viewer in the position of ‘the seen’, the object of all these gazes, and moves our ‘look’ around, and between, these
different elements in an attempt to figure out what is going on, “our first experience is of being there!” (Clarke, 1960, as cited in Staunton, 1998). As the viewer we invade the space of the scene with our look but are at the same time seen by the object. For these reasons, “this painting incarnates the look” (Staunton, 1998).

**Che voui?**

In Seminar X, *Anxiety*, Lacan develops a thought experiment which is of some importance to this paper, as it will assist in understanding the role that the tattoo can play in relation to the subject, and to the Other. Levi-Strauss (2008) had previously argued that in ‘mask cultures’, i.e. where masks had replaced tattoos as a sign of gender, social hierarchy, etc., the mask functioned as a stable and coherent indicator or signifier of the subject’s relationship with the Other. Lacan turns this idea on its head with his thought experiment. In his experiment he plays with Levi-Strauss’ idea, and instead of being confronted by an-other subject ‘like me’, “I imagine myself confronted with another animal, this one real and supposed to be gigantic on this occasion, that of the praying mantis […] moreover, since I did not know what kind of mask I was wearing [i.e. whether it is a male or a female mask] you can easily imagine that I had some reason not to be reassured” (Lacan, 1962-63, 14.11.62), i.e. the situation is a very different one depending on whether one is wearing a male or a female mask.

Lacan uses the metaphor of the praying mantis while discussing the gaze and anxiety for a number of reasons. For the purpose of this paper two (related) reasons are worth noting: the mating patterns of the female praying mantis and the anxiety of a gaze which has no reflection. These two elements contribute to a very particular anxiety inherent in the relationship with the Other, firstly what does she want? And, secondly, what am I to her? Lacan calls this the *che voui*? of the Other. The anxiety of this confrontation with the praying mantis is further exacerbated by the fact that “in the enigmatic ocular globe of the insect I did not see my own image” (Lacan, 1962-63, 14.11.62). So, we cannot even see what they see when they see us. It is worth mentioning that Lacan relates this ‘confrontation’ with the *che voui*? of the Other as the beginning of the child’s attempt to locate the desire of the Other: ‘what do they want for me?’ or ‘What do they want me for?’ This question of the Other’s desire is, to an extent, impossible to articulate because it is influenced by the parent’s

---

14 *Che voui*? is an Italian expression that Lacan uses to speak of the unknown/‘un-speak-able’ desire of the primordial Other. It is from the play *Le diable amoureux* by Cazotte, which Lacan makes reference to in his sixth seminar.
unconscious wishes, expectations, frustrations, etc. That is, it is a desire that is obscure, and thus requires some interpretation on the side of the child. They can then ‘reality test’ their idea of the Other’s desire and can develop a strategy to deal with it.

In the same seminar, Lacan makes reference to ‘the stain’ in regards to this confrontation with the enigmatic desire of the Other. By creating a stain or a mark that draws the Other’s gaze to a particular conflict, the subject is afforded an opportunity to escape the anxiety of ‘not knowing’ what they are for the Other, and gives an answer, i.e. ‘I am that’.

“Now remember what I told you about the stain at the level of the specular field: with the stain there appears, there is prepared the possibility of the resurgence, in the field of desire, of what is hidden behind, namely in this case this eye whose relationship with this field must necessarily be elided in order that desire can remain there with this ubiquitous, even vagabond possibility, which in any case allows it to escape from anxiety. To tame the god in the snare of desire is essential, and not to awaken anxiety” (Lacan, 1963, 05.06.63, p194)

What these ideas have to contribute to the discussion on tattooing is to elucidate how tattoos can act as an offence or as a defence to the gaze and the che voui? which is posed by the Other. That is, by offending the gaze, e.g. making themselves look ‘aggressive’, ‘intimidating’ or even ‘self-harming’, the subject can draw the Other's gaze to a particular conflict. Or the subject may seek a particular relationship to the gaze as a defence against the anxiety of ‘not knowing’ what they are to the Other, i.e. they attempt to answer the enigmatic question that has been posed. Both of these subjective positions believe that by creating a specific and distinct reaction/affect in the Other, it is possible for them to determine how they are perceived, and consequently treated, by the Other. Key in this perception is the idea of creating separateness from the Other, i.e. an attempt to break away from an identification with the Other’s desire, and the idea of difference, i.e. being marked out as ‘different’ from the rest of the group.

**Tattoos as a defence and/or and offence to the gaze**

To elucidate the role of tattoos in relation to the gaze, a number of examples present themselves which will now be discussed. They are: tattoos in the military, tattoos among prisoners, and tattoos in groups such as punks and goths. As was noted in the introduction, tattoos played a significant role in many cultures in determining rank, i.e. subjects had to
‘earn the right’ to get certain tattoos on the hands, neck! and face, or, to put it another way, they signified an individual's relationship to the tribe and their gods, and also related to their history. In this way they acted like a sort of uniform, a specular and symbolic image that signified rank, but unlike modern uniforms, nothing could be removed, only added to. Then, as tattoos began to lose their place in mainstream culture, to be replaced by the idea of the ‘pure/civilized’ body, new signifiers of rank and hierarchy were created by the different cultures to delineate importance, e.g. new styles of dress, jewellery, head adornments, masks, etc.

**Tattoos in the military.** This development, from tattoos being a sign of rank to the use of particular styles of clothing, is exemplified by the military, where it is clear to a (well informed\(^{15}\)) observer of a military uniform what rank the subject is, what they have trained in, whether they have seen active service and where, if they have been wounded, performed well, etc.\(^{16}\) To relate this to our discussion on the gaze it could be said that the uniform acts like ‘the stain’, i.e. as a defence to the gaze, it offers an explanation of sorts to the *che voui?* of the Other. What makes the military, as a group of subjects, interesting is that people in the military are more likely to get a tattoo then the civilian population (Lande, Bahroo & Soumoff, 2013). This phenomenon, which has been prevalent since World War II, relates to our discussion because it demonstrates that having an answer to the *che voui?* is not always enough for the subject, i.e. they want something more, a mark of their *particular* identity.

To put this another way, the subject (in his/her military uniform) is dressed in the signifier of their position within the military which is supposed to represent them, their identity, but it does not ‘tell the whole story’ or ‘describe them well enough’. The tattoo then functions as this ‘bit more’ of their identity/character that cannot be compressed onto the uniform but can be worn alongside it. Here the long list of reasons that people in the military use when getting a tattoo can be referred to, e.g. the most popular tattoo are names and portraits of family members and friends, and the least popular related to military achievements, i.e. what the uniform conveys (Lande et al, 2013). All of these are significant ‘marks’ which ground our idea of identity/self that cannot be put on the uniform, there literally is no space for it, there is no room in the Other’s desire for the individual’s subjective position. In a particular way the tattoo can complement the uniform, filling in the gaps so that

---

15 ‘Someone who knows’, i.e. a member of the ‘in-group’ (e.g. Allport, 1970).
16 These marks of the uniform are remarkably similar to the marks ascribed to tattoos by the cultures of Polynesia (Gell, 1993).
the subject can more closely identify with the image in the mirror and feel less anxiety when facing the gaze of the Other.

**Tattoos among prisoners.** Tattoos have been associated with prisoners since the Chinese authorities began using tattoos to mark convicts 2,500 years ago (McCallum, 1988). However, at different times and for different reasons, their prominence has varied within the many cultures that have utilised them in that time. One place where tattoos had profound importance in establishing hierarchy was in the prison system of communist Russia (USSR). Russia has a history of tattooing convicts, i.e. in the 1800s the authorities would mark out convicts by tattooing their faces with the letters K.A.T., which stood for *katorzhnik*, and meant that the subject had been ‘sentenced to hard labour’. The prisoners began to take these marks, *nakolki*, as their own and would refer to themselves as cats, *kots*¹⁷, and tattooed images of cats on their bodies (Shoham, 2010). When the communists took power in 1919 the prisoners began to tattoo their chests with images of Lenin, Marx and Engels to avoid being shot by the firing squad, because they believed their gaolers would never damage the images of their ideological leaders.¹⁸

In spite of the belief that crime was the result of capitalism, under the communist system the prison swelled up to ten times its capacity as people were given huge sentences for thefts from ‘the state’/‘the people’ (Galeotti, 1994), and the prisoners had to develop their own caste system to deal with the pressure the prisons were under. In practical terms it meant that everything was done in shifts in cells, e.g. sleeping, standing, eating, playing cards, etc., and someone had to organise and enforce the rules. A distinctive code of tattoos were developed and enforced by the leaders of this new group who called themselves the ‘Thieves in Law’, *Vory Y Zakone*, and they assumed control of the prisons. Examples of these tattoos and their meaning were collected and analysed by a prison guard named Danzig Baldaev who collected thousands of images during his 30 plus years working in the Russian Prison system, and printed his results in a three volume encyclopaedia.

Many of the tattoos used around this time were, on the surface, simple images that held a particular meaning, e.g. the cathedral spires each represented a sentence of their conviction, a virgin mother and child meant that one has been ‘born into a life of crime’,

---

¹⁷ *Kot* also served as an acronym for *Korenoi Obitatel Tyurmi*, ‘native occupant of jail’ or ‘prison is my second home’.
¹⁸ The plan half worked, they were systematically shot in the back of the head instead! (DeMello, 1993)
¹⁹ The use of the expression ‘thieves in law’ is interesting and alludes, albeit unknowingly, to Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* (1913) mentioned earlier.
swastikas represented the wearer being ‘an enemy of the state’, an oskal or ‘big grin’, which shows an animal (usually a wolf, bear, tiger or cat) bearing its teeth showed a defiance to all authority, eyes on the shoulders/chest marked out an ‘overseer’, i.e. the Vory’s representative in the cell, etc. The prisoners also used slogans to display their rank, anger and defiance of authority, e.g. as they did with kot, the prisoners used the word mir, which means ‘world’, as an acronym for Menya Ispravit Rastrel, ‘only execution will/can reform me’. Similarly, a pickpocket had the mark of a beetle, ZhUK, which stood for Zhelayu Udachnykh Krazh, ‘may your theft be a success’.

While it may seem remarkable and a little stupid, to mark out on your body the crimes you have committed and your rank in a criminal organisation for all, including the prison guards, to see, such were the conditions in the prisons. In order to survive the daily acts of violence, one’s body needed to depict the subject’s history visually so that if someone is asleep and the person next in line sees that they are ‘not to be woken up’, they will choose not to stab them for an extra hour of sleep because they can see the sleeper’s rank. Tattoos were not ‘given out’ in prison, they had to be earned by the prisoner through fighting the system, carrying out orders on behalf of their superiors and defending their fellow prisoners. If a prisoner got a tattoo which was not ‘earned’, the Vory Y Zakone would order their supplicants to remove the tattoo even if it meant that death of individual wearing it. This control over unsanctioned tattoos demonstrates how the tattoo took on a symbolic value among the prisoners, i.e. it was a culture in which social relations dominated and tattoos were a mark of inclusion within and commitment to the group. As Freud notes in his paper on Group Psychology (1921), the tattoo in this instance acts as a visual representation of the libidinal cathexes of the group members for the leader(s) and, to a lesser extent, for one another.

It can be seen how, in this context, tattoos acted as a defence against the gaze of the group, incarnated by the Vory Y Zakone, and as an offence to the gaze of the authorities. That is, the tattoos had the qualities of self-preservation, i.e. they mark the subject out as ‘not to be woken’ by the other prisoners, and of separateness, i.e. to show that they are not on the side of the authorities.

**Tattoos of punks and goths.** In contrast to both of the above examples, the tattoos of the punk rock and goth movements were a way of displaying anger and discontent directed at all authority, a finger in the gaze of the Other. Their use of skulls, slogans, album art and other symbols of pain, anger and suffering were a direct and immediate expression of dissatisfaction, i.e. lack. Unlike the tattoos of the Russian prisoners which identified the
wearer as ‘someone not to be trifled with’ in response to the Other’s gaze, the punk’s response was more akin to that of the melancholic – someone not worth wasting the Other’s time over. As Freud (1914) noted in his paper on melancholia “the melancholic displays something else besides what is lacking in mourning – an extraordinary diminution in his self-regard, an impoverishment of his ego on a grand scale” (Freud, 1914, p246). Here the tattoo acts as a symbol of this ‘impoverishment’, and the subject hopes by disgusts the gaze, forcing it away, or making themselves ‘worthless’ the Other’s gaze will pass over them without stopping – they can evade it. It is almost as if, by making their body so unpalatable to the Other, they hope to make the praying mantis withdraw.
IV: The ‘tattoo act’

“To be or not to be, that is the question”
(Shakespeare, Hamlet, line 1749)

The choice to mark one’s body with a tattoo is a particularly subjective decision, so in this chapter the tattoo as ‘an act’ on the body of the subject will be discussed, specifically in regards to the Lacanian distinction between the concepts of acting out and the passage a l’acte. Passage a l’acte is a term borrowed from French psychiatry, which, according to Penot (1997), is ‘the least desirable of all analytic outcomes’. It is used “to designate those impulsive acts, of a violent or criminal nature, which sometimes mark the onset of an acute psychotic episode [...] When the subject proceeds from the violent idea or intention to the corresponding act” (Penot, 1997, p136). Here acting out is seen as something which remains in the symbolic order, the realm of meaning, whereas the passage a l’acte involves a step off the stage of symbolisation into the real. As the tattoo is a real writing upon the body, unlike the symptom which is a symbolic writing on the body, it will be argued that the tattoo offers the subject as means of having ‘one foot in either camp’, and that the tattoo can be used to fulfil either function.

Acting out (agieren)

Freud first used the phrase ‘acting out’, agieren, in his 1905 case study of Dora, to describe what happened when she broke off her treatment prematurely “because of the unknown quality in me which reminded Dora of Herr K. She took her revenge on me as she had wanted to take her revenge on him [...] Thus she acted out an essential part of her recollections and phantasies instead of producing it in the treatment” (Freud, 1905, p119). Freud had previously used the word handeln, a more colloquial German expression which means to act, to describe slips and ‘bungled actions’ and, as noted by Rowan (2011), this has led some subsequent writers to “collapse the distinction between mistaken acts arising on the basis of psychical conflict and acting out, and in so doing reduce the latter to a straightforward neurotic act” (Rowan, 2011, p85).

In his technical paper Remembering, Repeating and Working Through, Freud developed his analytic position, qua Dora and acting out, and related both transference and acting out to repetition. In a complex and well known passage, Freud makes reference to the subtlety and complexity of the relation between memory and repetition, “the patient does not
remember anything of what he has forgotten and repressed but acts it out. He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he repeats it; without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it” (Freud, 1914, p150). He subsequently adds, “as long as the patient is in the treatment he cannot escape from the compulsion to repeat and in the end we understand that this is his way of remembering” (ibid, p150). That is, for Freud, acting out is an essential and ‘normal’ aspect of the treatment situation and not something that should be met with surprise or contempt. Simply, instead of remembering some situation or scenario, the subject was compelled to re-create it in the analytic encounter. Therefore it should be treated in the same way as the transference, because for psychoanalysis, as it had been for Freud, “acting out and transference were essentially manifestations of the same thing, repetition in the place of remembering” (Rowan, 2011, p86). In his technical papers, Freud did make note of the potentially disruptive influence of acting out in the analytic encounter, as had happened with Dora, and said that the “main instrument for curbing the patient's compulsion to repeat and for turning it into a motive for remembering lies in the handling of the transference” (Freud, 1914, p154). It could be added here that what the subject needs and (unconsciously) desires in the tattoo parlour is an analyst to interpret and ask them ‘what does that mean?’, and not a tattooist who will give them exactly what they asked for. That is, the subject is looking to say something which can be teased out if they speak about it, but will continue to ‘suffer’ if their act is not recognised as such by the Other, i.e. if the transference is not handled properly, the subject will be unable to ‘work through’ the issue.

Passage a l’acte

In his Seminar on Anxiety, referred to above, Lacan discussed the concept of acting out in relation a particular paper of Freud’s, The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman (1920), so as to show the qualitative difference between the concepts of passage a l’acte and acting out. In his paper, Freud describes a ‘beautiful and clever young girl of eighteen’ who belonged to ‘a family of good standing’, had developed an admiration for a certain society lady, who was described as ‘a cocotte’. According to Freud, much to the concern and displeasure of her parents, she had acted a lot like a suitor to this woman who was about ten years older than herself. It was locally known that this woman lived with a friend, a married woman, with whom she was intimate, while at the same time having ‘promiscuous affairs’ with a number of men. Freud notes two details, in apparent contradiction to one another, which antagonised her parents further: she often walked with this woman through the most frequented streets of the town, “being thus quite neglectful of
her own reputation (Freud, 1920, p148); and she initially did not tell her parents the truth about her relationship with this woman, although she had taken her mother as a confidant “concerning her passion” (ibid, p149) for this woman.

As was ever going to happen, given her behaviour, one day this young woman and her cocotte friend were walking down a street when the young woman’s father passed them, and he gave them “an angry glance which boded no good” (ibid, p148). The young woman confessed to her companion that it was her father who had given her the ‘irate’ glance, and that he had forbidden their friendship. Upon hearing this the lady became annoyed and told the girl to leave her alone and never make contact with her again, the affair was at an end. Immediately afterwards she took leave of the lady and flung herself “over a wall down the side of a cutting onto a suburban railway line which ran close by” (ibid, p148). This incident, a serious suicide attempt, had a number of outcomes. Firstly, the girl was quite badly injured and had to spend a long time recovering from her injuries, although there was ‘little permanent damage’. After she recovered she found it much easier to get her own way than she had before and her parents ‘didn’t dare oppose her with the same level of determination’. Also, the lady, who had up until that point “received her advances coldly, was moved by such an unmistakable proof of serious passion and began to treat her in a more friendly manner” (ibid, p148).

Freud notes that the ‘plausible’ motive, of ‘losing her loved one for ever’, was only one motive behind her attempt at suicide, behind which lay another deeper interpretation that highlighted two other motives – the fulfilment of a (self) punishment and the fulfilment of a wish. “As the latter it meant the attainment of the very wish which, when frustrated, had driven her into homosexuality – namely the wish to have a child by her father, for now she ‘fell’ through her father’s fault” 20 (ibid, p162). Her unconscious ‘need for punishment’ reveals how she may have developed strong death wishes against one or both of her parents. Against her father, as revenge for impeding her love affair, and also against her mother who had fallen pregnant with her youngest brother at ‘a crucial moment in her psychosexual development’. As Freud notes “probably no one finds the mental energy required to kill himself unless, in the first place, in doing so he is at the same time killing an object with whom he has identified himself, and, in the second place, is turning against himself a death wish which had been directed at someone else” (ibid, p162). So, through her act, i.e. ‘falling’

20 A footnote in Freud’s (1920) paper notes that there is a play on the German word niederkommen, which can mean ‘to fall’ and ‘to be delivered of a child’. This colloquialism is also present in English where the verb ‘to fall’ can relate to pregnancy and childbirth.
due to her father’s actions, she satisfied the fulfilment of a wish and, through hurting herself quite badly, she got to satisfy her desire for revenge upon those people who had hurt her.

**The difference between acting out and passage a l’acte**

In his seminar XVIII, on the semblance, Lacan distinguishes what he sees as the major qualitative differences between acting out and, the concept with which it is usually contrasted, the *passage a l’acte*. To do so will require a brief reference to his concept of the semblance. Lacan’s idea of the semblance relates to how human beings attempt to live ‘meaningful lives’ in a world that lacks meaning. Through the construction of imaginary and symbolic ‘coordinates’ the subject keeps up a certain pretence that masks the real and meaninglessness, and can keep it at a bearable distance. “This is why there is no semblance of discourse, everything that is discourse, can only present itself as semblance, and nothing is built on it that is not at the basis of this something that is called signifier, which, in the light of what I put forward to you today, is identical to this status as such of the semblance” (Lacan, 1971, 13.1.71, p10).

For Lacan, the *passage a l’acte* marks the point at which discourse and language fail to maintain the semblance and, as such, the real makes its appearance behind it. This is directly contrasted with acting out where the semblance is elevated, placed front and centre.

“At the limits of discourse, in so far as it strives to make the same semblance hold up, there is from time to time something real, this is what is called the *passage a l’acte* [...] Note that in most cases, the *passage a l’acte* is carefully avoided. It only happens by accident, and this is also an occasion to illuminate what is involved in what I have long differentiated from the *passage a l’acte*, namely, acting out to bring the semblance onto the stage, to put onto the stage, to make an example of it, this is what in this order is called acting out” (Lacan, 1971, 20.01.71).

When the young homosexual woman is faced with her father’s glare, it is at this point that she experiences what Lacan calls a “moment of greatest embarrassment [...] with the behavioural addition of emotion as disorder of movement” (Lacan, 1963, 23.01.63), as per his anxiety matrix. This emotion, which is coupled with ‘a disorder of movement’, realise what Lacan called the two necessary conditions for a *passage a l’acte* to occur, which, in the case of the young homosexual woman, takes the form of ‘falling to one’s demise’. What is important to note here is that, unlike acting out, the *passage a l’acte* is not demonstrative, i.e.
it does not make an appeal to the Other, like is seen in acting out. As Safouan notes:

“[y]ou may consider acting out as going into the scene of the imaginary in order to signify something. Thus it calls for interpretation. But when her father failed to understand anything, and was even furious about her liaison (she saw his disapproval in the way he looked at her), she then made the suicidal act, jumping out of the scene, which was a passage a l’acte. What is characteristic of acting out is going to the scene to signify something. Passage a l’acte is throwing oneself outside the scene” (Safouan, 2013, p 27-28).

Lacan himself uses the example of Dora to further distinguish the two concepts from one another. “If Dora’s slap [to Herr K. at the scene beside the lake] is a passage a l’acte, I would say that all the paradoxical behaviour, that Freud discovers immediately and with such perspicacity, of Dora in the K’s household is an acting out” (Lacan, 1963, 23.01.63, p82).

Where do we situate tattoos?

As the examples of tattoos in the previous chapters have shown us, most ‘tattoo acts’ take place within the field of acting out, i.e. it is an attempt to bring something into the imaginary field which cannot be articulated in the symbolic, e.g. the Russian prisoners needed their tattoos ‘to speak for them’, either as a means of communicating a message or as a warning against the staff and the other prisoners. But unlike other types of acting out, the act of getting a tattoo means that there is a permanent reminder of this choice. The ‘mark’ or stain of the tattoo signifies, that something has not been, or cannot be, articulated, and that this unconscious element which has been demanding some form expression has coerced the subject to alter their physical appearance in a permanent way. What is important to note here is that little to no analysis takes place prior to acquiring the tattoo, in spite of the fact that many tattooists ‘know’ (from personal experience) that the choice of tattoo always relates to something deeply personal and particular, what in psychoanalysis is known as subjectivity.

This dimension of subjectivity is what determines every choice that the subject makes throughout their lives, and therefore too their choice of tattoo. Like the signifier, its meaning is something relative to the meaning of all the other signifiers, i.e. the style, size, placement, colour or lack thereof, whether it is constantly visible or always hidden, all mean something specific to the individual who wears the tattoo and therefore also the gaze that views it, because, as noted above, the tattoo can perform various functions in relation to the gaze. Here it could also be noted that, given the diversity of designs, patterns and styles of visual art
worldwide, what we should see in a self-expressive medium like tattoos is a desire for ‘uniqueness’, something that nobody else has. While this does from time to time occur, either through the artists style (e.g. the work of Grime) or because it is what the subject desires (e.g. ‘the lizard man’), and is arguably how all pre-existing styles began, the act is often closer to a passage a l’acte than it is to acting out.

Whatever the exact reason, or arguably, the specific pattern or design of the final tattoo, which like a dream symbol is heavily ‘overdetermined’ (Freud, 1901), the compulsion to be tattooed and to seek out ‘an-other-who-knows’ (the tattooist), are in themselves particularly rich avenues to explore in all psychotherapy, and in particular psychoanalysis because it takes account of this agieren that Freud wrote about. It indicates that the tattoo has got a psychical value, it means something to the subject but this meaning21 will differ depending on whether the subject is psychotic or neurotic. In the neurotic this meaning is unconscious, the subject knows it means something, they just do not know what it really means, that is, what it signifies to the Other. In the psychotic the tattoo has a concrete meaning and may be an attempt at identification or a way of stabilising a delusion, either by ‘bringing something to the surface’ which was hidden under the skin (Lemma, 2010) or by putting something on the skin to remake the imaginary of the body.

While the examples and discussion above give the impression that tattoos, since they have a symbolic, real and imaginary value, are intimately connected to acting act, because tattoos use the real substance of the body as their medium, they can be used in an attempt to achieve a passage a l’acte. Examples of these individuals are easy to find, thanks to google, and usually these subjects choose enormous animal themes to transform their appearance into that of their chosen creature, e.g. the Lizard man, Cheetah man. Accompanying the tattoos, which usually cover over 90% of their body, are other body modifications – piercings, sharpened/pointed teeth, ‘sub-dermal implants’ (i.e. the ‘lumps and bumps’ that further the look), scarification and partial amputations – which, far from attempting to achieve an aesthetic ideal, as was the case with Orlan22, are an attempt by the subject to distance themselves from humanity, and their history in it.

The tattoo offers the subject a way to alter their relation to the world and to their bodies, and these subjects use it to ‘run to the edge of the scene’ of the semblance. It could be said that they tattoo themselves to demonstrate their break from human culture, their radical

---

21 Readers are referred to footnote 4.
22 Orlan is a French performance artist who underwent massive cosmetic surgery so as to alter her face to ‘the ideal of male desire’ as depicted by ‘the Masters’, e.g. the brow of Leonardo’s Mona Lisa, the chin of Botticelli’s Venus, etc.
other-ness to ‘the mainstream’ or their identification with the ‘animal kingdom’. So, in this way, their tattoos, as an aspect of their behaviour, are an acting out. Also, since the act(s) lack the “impulsivity” of Penot's definition, they cannot be a pure passage a l’acte because it doesn’t erupt into “violence” or “criminality”, and the move from the violent idea to the corresponding act is a long process that involves many appointments, healing time, etc., and is not simply a case of ‘jumping over a wall’.

However, one should not get stuck in the definition and lose sight of the material from which the definition was derived, so the discussion will return briefly to Freud's young homosexual woman. If it can be imagined that this young woman lived in modern times and got a rose, a love heart or her lovers name tattooed on her body to demonstrate “her passion” for this lady, it would be an acting out, a mark for the gaze, and particularly for her father. However, if following a similar scenario with the ‘irate glare’ of her father, this woman went to a tattooist to get ‘lesbian’ tattooed on her face it would be more of a passage a l’acte, an “impulsive” and (subjectively) “violent” act. Now, where would the ‘tattoo act’ be situated if she instead decided to gradually transform her physical body into that of another creature, something ‘not human’ in its appearance. It seems, to the author at least, that this approach is akin to have ‘one foot in both camps’. The choice to step out of the human condition, away from the bond of social relations, is an impulsive one, it happens and the subject follows through with it, i.e. there is ‘a direct move from the violent idea to the corresponding act’ and the violence is entirely perpetrated on the subject’s body. 23 But in its very essence, i.e. ‘not human’, it refers to the semblance, to the ‘before picture’, i.e. ‘human’. Also, the length of time, between the initial decision and the final act of their transformation, means that their behaviour over this time is an acting out – a gradual, yet permanent, distancing of oneself from the Other, and could be the result of a specific trauma or an attempt to escape the anxiety of the gaze.

He lives the poetry he cannot write.
Oscar Wilde, A Portrait of Dorian Gray.

23 Interesting, the skin of the body is both the first ‘site’ of human relations and the object that is damaged most in the procedure(s).
Conclusion

While this study was unable to provide an exhaustive study of the practice of tattooing and its relation to psychoanalysis, the insights that it provides, outlined above, demonstrates that the practice of tattooing has a particular clinical significance for psychoanalysis. Freud’s work on totem and taboo and groups outlined why the tribes of ancient times felt compelled to inscribe the totem into the skin and how the tattoos acted like a visual ‘paternal metaphor’ that marked out the limits of pleasure open to each subject, i.e. peasant or chief. Each tribe developed their own arbitrary meanings for these tattoos, so the marks of the tattoo marked their identification with, and possibly ‘incorporation’ of, the group. Also, as with Otzi’s tattoos, these tattoos were possibly an attempt to deal with the real of the body, which the tribe felt was part of ‘the (totemic) problem’.

In chapter two, it was shown how the subject’s ‘body’ is, to an extent, ‘constructed’ during the early relationship with the mother and that that the skin plays a particularly important role in this development. And, as was shown, the practice of tattooing highlights the importance of skin and the concept one has of the body, which, as noted by Lacan (1976-77), has ‘the structure of a torus’. It was shown how the tattoo uses the drive of erotogenic masochism, as theorised by Freud (1924), to achieve a form of psychosexual satisfaction, and that this is what gives tattoos their value in the psychic economy of the subject.

In chapter three, the tattoo as a way of ‘dealing with’ the gaze was discussed, to demonstrate how the tattoo can be an act that attempts to negotiate the anxiety brought about by the encounter with the ‘enigmatic’ desire of the Other. As was shown, the tattoo offers the subject many different strategies for dealing with the gaze, e.g. the subject may use the tattoos as ‘a stain’ (Lacan, 1962-63) so as to draw attention to the Other’s attention to a particular conflict, or they may use it to display their ‘impoverished ego’ and hope that the Other will pass them by.

In the final chapter, the ‘tattoo act’ was discussed and it was found to be predominantly an acting out, an act in relation to ‘the stage’ or ‘the scene’ of the semblance, and not a passage a l’acte. This is because the ‘tattoo act’ attempts to express something, it brings into the intersection of the imaginary and symbolic something which cannot be otherwise articulated. Unlike the passage a l’acte, which is a ‘throwing oneself outside the scene’ and not ‘demonstrative’, the ‘tattoo act’ is an attempt to communicate something to the Other. However, as was noted above, since the tattoo uses the real of the body as its material, it is possible for a passage a l’acte to occur.

While this paper has started to interrogate these topics, there remains much work to be
done in order to better appreciate the ancient practice of tattooing and its relation to the human psyche. One possibility would be to explore the tattoo in the context of Lacan’s later work on topology, which was briefly touched on above, to better understand the relationship of the tattoo in regards to the registers of the real, the symbolic and the imaginary, and the relationship between the tattoo, the body as a torus and jouissance.

*She had a flower tattoo on her wrist; “What does that mean?” he asked her.*

*“Absolutely nothing,” she said, “it’s just a flower.”*

C. JoyBell C.
Bibliography:


Gustafson, M. (2000). The Tattoo in the Later Roman Empire and Beyond, In J. Caplan
What am I now? A Psychoanalytic Investigation of Tattooing


