

# Youth, Space and Time

*Agoras and Chronotopes in the Global City*

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## The Tattooed Young Body: A Body Still under Suspicion?

*Vitor Sérgio Ferreira*

There's something really the matter with most people who wear tattoos. There's at least some terrible story. I know from experience that there's always something terribly flawed about people who are tattooed, above some little something that Johnny had done in the Navy, even though that's a bad sign... It's terrible. Psychologically it's crazy. Most people who are tattooed, it's the sign of some feeling of inferiority, they're trying to establish some macho identification for themselves.

TRUMAN CAPOTE, quoted in GROBEL, 1985, 126

### Introduction

This chapter looks at tattooed young bodies in Portugal. It is argued that the corporeal languages and practices of tattooing do not so much explicitly challenge systems of domination, but tend to shatter them micropolitically, applying a brake to the globalised empire of the *young body*. The testimonies presented in this chapter come from individual, in-depth interviews with heavily tattooed and body-pierced young men and women. The fieldwork for this research was carried out in Lisbon, Portugal. An extensive description of the methods used in this research is provided in Ferreira (2014).

Generally, the body is seen in its physicality, as a living material structure with morphological boundaries. The physical body has organs with physiological functions. It has measurable and optimisable sensory capacities. It is an organic *topos*, subject to biological, chemical and physical mechanisms that require maintenance, and must be repaired in the case of abuse, illness, accident, disease, or the wear and tear of living. Nevertheless, that same living body is also a *lived body* (Csordas, 1994); a corporeal reality experienced and perceived in the first person and among other people. The embodied individual does not experience his or her body alone. Experiencing the body is also a social affair, so we must consider the ways in which the body interacts with and learns from other bodies. The body is also an object of classifications and categorisations, value judgements and preconceptions.

Habitually perceived as individual corporeality, the human body is also a social construction. The maintenance, modification and control of the physical body are mediated by a network of institutions and individuals in both the public and private spheres. The body is both individually and socially lived and is experienced in a diverse range of ways. These ways include not only physical properties (any body is always different to the body next to it), but also in relation to the social and symbolic structures specific to a particular social formation and relative to time and space.

According to Boltanski (1971, 208), the body is lived and experienced differently depending on the *somatic culture* in which it is immersed. The concept of *somatic culture* corresponds to the set of rules, codes and conducts involved in corporeal production, perception and consumption that results from objective social conditions. It is within this framework that the body is born, develops, changes and dies.

From this perspective, the body can be symbolically and socially appropriated, reinterpreted and updated in diverse ways in different somatic cultures, which shape both the way each person perceives his or her own body, and the gaze that others direct at it. As Maffesoli (2002, 241) puts it: “the individual body owes its existence to the reality of the social body. Or rather, from a constructivist perspective, the body itself is ‘constructed’ by the social body: it is the other’s look that creates me”.

### The Young Body and the Embodiment of Youth

In the somatic culture of contemporary western societies, we find that the *young body* possesses a central value as a referential and reverential corporeality. Emphasising the *referential* and *reverential* nature of the *young body* means highlighting its normative and socially instituted status as a *modal corporeality* (Berthelot 1983, 128); as a possibility in which a given set of physical characteristics and bodily techniques comes together to constitute the reference point for a social legitimacy with cult value. This youthful model of corporeality currently serves to ground society’s notions of what is, and what is not, a “good-looking”, “sexy”, “seductive”, “desirable”, “healthy”, “dynamic” and “energetic” body – values that flood daily life via the media.

The *young body* is an ideal type in Weber’s sense (1949) – an imagined body which is consubstantiated in the obsession with maintaining a body that is active and capable, far from the threat of illness or presage of death. It inheres in the desire to stretch the skin to its limit and obtain a silhouette that matches the canons of perfection; a body that is seductive and sensual, always desirable

and desiring, hedonistic and irreverent; a body that must provide enjoyment and immediate pleasure. It is on the basis of this generic model of youthful corporeality that the bodies of young people become objects of social observation and contemplation, vigilance and celebration, scrutiny and evaluation.

*Youth* is a category both invented and socially constructed in recent times. Whether we treat it as a *word* (Bourdieu, 1980) or as a *metaphor* (Feixa, 1993), it implicitly refers to a body. Even from a social point of view, *being young* involves the age-based codification of a given *model of corporeality*, inasmuch as the body is a privileged forum for *visualising age* (Bytheway and Johnson, 1998).

As a physical reality that is constantly changing, the body is a space offering a subjective and intersubjective interpretation of a moment in the subject's life course, lending visibility to the signs of its passage until it eventually dies and disappears. In contemporary western societies ageing and old age constitute a stigma that urgently needs to be dealt with, "evocative of a death that makes its way among the silence of the cells" (Le Breton 2000, 146). This is why the cult of the body and the cult of youth go side by side, amplifying as they go that which Lasch (1981, 207) suggests is the "almost neurotic" desire to remain young, to adopt and maintain a certain image, posture and corporal performance, in other words a *gestalt* connoted by the public image created for youth.

Thus, when we identify *youth* as a social category, we must consider a *corporeal condition* which is consubstantiated in a multiplicity of symbolically specific images and performances. *Youth* is socially constructed and recognisable in daily interactions through the perception and categorisation of given physical traits and corporeal performances, attributed to a given condition in terms of age. The boundaries that define youth as a social condition and category involve markers of transition to adulthood (Ferreira and Nunes, 2010). Yet they also involve interpretation of corporeal attributes associated with early phases in the biological process of growth and ageing.

An example of "young" corporeal attributes is constituted by the first signs of "puberty": the first spots, appearance of body hair, menstruation in the case of girls or the first ejaculations in the case of boys. Conversely, adulthood is corporeally associated with attributes of "maturity", such as the first white hair, baldness, wrinkles, weight gain, decrease in vitality and so on. In addition to these phenotypical signs, there is a whole complex of body images (clothes and hairstyles) and performances (postures, gestures, physical activities) that invoke the process of either experiencing and living, or getting further away from, the condition of being young.

Nowadays this process is served by a whole range of resources and services created for corporeal control and vigilance, that encourage the belief in a

perfectible and preservable body. Aesthetic, cosmetic, technological, sporting, nutritional and surgical innovations aim to ensure the body is individually managed so as to produce or prolong youthfulness. This is a body which people obstinately want to maintain *young*, and which lives in the illusory hope that the paraphernalia of resources at its disposal will enable it “to free itself from age and turn into an imagined ideal” (Martín-Barbero 1998, 31). These resources and services drive the individual to preserve her or his body and make it last, in the belief of gaining time and beating time.

As pointed out above, “youth” or “being young” is a time that is socially constructed, but codified in the body. These days the period of youth lasts ever longer, and people try to make it last even longer again in corporeal terms by buying mercantile promises of the *juvenalisation* of bodies (Featherstone and Wernick 1995, 177). Relative to the goods and services that promise to prolong youth, one is young when one looks young. And the condition of being young is moved beyond when one ceases to look young. Being and appearing youthful merge in an image which, in its projection and perception, shapes the *figure* of a young person.

### From Conforming to the Young Body to Contesting through the Tattooed Body

Commercially exploited on a global scale, the *young body* colonises the flesh of large numbers of young people and of many others who want to look young. It thereby tends to marginalise the diversity of corporeal possibilities available in youth culture contexts. At the same time, the classifications created by institutions that produce and reproduce policies on the young body are also responsible for fact that less orthodox young bodies are socially excluded. Yet social exclusion may itself be seen as productive since exclusion does not place these young people “outside the social world”, but rather undoes the bonds that tie them to the orientations and institutional activities that favour the normative order of things, putting them into contact with other zones of sociability and symbolic productions.

In this sense, youth sociabilities produced within the scope of “youth scenes” or “microcultures” (Ferreira, 2008a) take on an added value and meaning for the social practices of young people who are corporeally non-conformist,

For these young people, the group sometimes constitutes the only space of social acceptance and integration in the face of the adversity on the part of the conventional world. Without the references for the modelling



of “oppositional” reactions and without the sustainment provided by the group, a non-conformist identity would certainly be much more difficult. (...) the support of the collective ties supplies the security and support needed to develop and express “oppositional” attitudes.

FERREIRA 2000, 64–77

As part of these social contexts, in a movement against the hegemonic, saturated *young body* model, many young people try to challenge the “normalising decrees” that call for investments in this ideal. They colonise the unaccommodating, plain and natural(ised) territory of the body. In their efforts to transform the “natural” body into an entity rendered significant by difference, innovation and singularisation they employ corporeal counter-models. They end up producing spectacular, hyperbolic bodies that are excessive in terms of the image they present, the movements they make and/or the sensations they explore. Such bodies challenge the civilised, contained and self-controlled discretion prescribed by the institutionalised system of youth-corporeality production, celebration, commodification and consumption.

When we go into youth worlds: the street, the neighbourhood, the mall and the microcultural spaces where young people meet, it is easy to see the plurality of bodies that circulate there. Some display a variety of *neo-baroque* aesthetics (Calabrese, 1999), characterised by the excessive ornamentation and the cult of the detail as a strategy for achieving representation of originality. Others favour kinetic mobilisations that use body abilities and acrobatics little recognised in the traditional sporting field, such as *parcours*.<sup>1</sup> Some young people seek sensorial investments that involve unusual sensations, or experiment with physiological limits and the intensification of emotional reactions, involving pain, fear, vertigo, adrenaline, pleasure, and so on.

These are aesthetic, motor and sensory investments that do not *conform to*, but rather *confront* the globalised imaginary tenets that homogenise the idealised figure of youth. These other bodies – heterodox manifestations that seek to contest – signify forms of young people’s corporeal experience and existence that offer alternatives to hegemonic configurations. Their rarity and spectacular nature give these forms of corporeal expression a visibility that the owners of these bodies never had before. These peripheral corporeal aesthetics are sensationalised further by the media (see Pitts, 1999). Such bodies are looked on with distrust. They are remarked on and stigmatised in certain

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1 Free running activity, moving quickly and fluidly through an urban area, by surmounting obstacles such as walls and railings and leaping across open spaces, as in a stairwell or between buildings.

urban circuits. They flag their owners as potentially dangerous subjects. In Portugal this is the case with young bodies that are extensively marked by tattoos and body piercings.

### Marginality of the Marked Body

A number of authors have documented the popularity of tattooing and body-piercing practices in the last two decades (for example, Atkinson, 2003; DeMello, 2000; Pitts, 2003). As practices within an expanding body-design industry, tattooing and body piercing have been globalised and commodified right across the western world (Bengtsson, Ostberg and Kjeldgaard, 2005; Kosut, 2006a).

However, certain types of tattooing and body piercing are far from being socially accepted, even among the younger generation. Genital piercings and facial tattoos are still seen as non-mainstream, non-normative, deviant; as extreme forms of body modification, as are branding, burning or cutting the skin (Goode and Vail, 2008; Klesse, 1999; Myers, 1992). Heavily tattooed and pierced bodies are still perceived by society as bizarre and anomalous, extreme and unusual, particularly when they are evaluated relative to corporeal modification procedures that serve to adapt bodies to the institutionalised and celebrated image of the *young body* – smooth, healthy, and discreet.

Indeed, recent renaissance of ancestral practices of extensively inking and piercing the body has led to the revival of old stereotypes of deviance and moral panic about their users. When tattoos came to the West from exotic and distant colonies, they were used by some of the lowest fringes of the social classes (Caplan, 2000). In the second half of the 19th century, extensively tattooed individuals regularly appeared in circus freak shows and travelling fairs, alongside dwarfs, giants, Siamese twins, bearded women and other “monsters” and/or “primitive” curiosities (Bogdan, 1994). At the beginning of the 20th century, tattoos became widespread in neighbourhoods of dubious repute, among social figures associated with vagrancy and criminality: sailors, dockworkers, prostitutes, ex-convicts, labourers, gang members and other types of *scoundrel* (DeMello, 1993; Le Breton, 2002; Peixoto, 1990).

Later, inking and piercing the body were included in some youth subcultures that emerged throughout the second half of the 20th century. They served as symbols of resistance against “mainstream society” and its domination and homogenisation of the *young body* (Camphausen, 1997; DeMello, 2000; Caplan, 2000; Le Breton, 2002; Phillips, 2001; Steward, 1990). In the twentieth century, legal and medical fields worked hard to classify and institutionalise those

who sported tattoos and other body marks as social deviants, or psychological patients in need of either criminal (see Lombroso, 1895) and/or medical care (for example, Lacassagne, 1881). Even today, when these body-modification practices are much more visible and widespread, there are legal and medical discourses that continue to pathologise them as indicators of potential deviance, delinquency, personality disorder, or self-harming or addictive behaviour (for example, Favazza, 1996; Hewitt, 1997; Kosut, 2006b; Putnins, 2002, Winchel and Stanley, 1991).

Although body marks originated outside the traditional norms of society, some sociologists (for example Mendes de Almeida, 2000; Sweetman, 1999; Turner, 1999) enthusiastically argue that these identity resources have become fashionable. They are now beautification accessories and included in the body-design industry. It is claimed they are thus depleted of their traditional subcultural and/or anthropological meanings. Body marks have been transformed into nothing more than sign-commodities of contemporary consumerism; hyper-cool accessories that conform to current trend fashions; or ironic, playful clichés borrowed from geographically and historically distant cultures.

It is not my intention to contradict these claims. This has indeed happened. That said though, this is only a partial view. It does not take account of the complexity and plurality of ways of consuming body marks in the contemporary world. Although tattoos and body piercings have become trendier – for example among young females (Atkinson, 2002; Hardin, 1999; Mifflin, 1997; Pitts, 1998; Riley & Cahill, 2005) and middle-class young people (Blanchard, 1991; DeMello, 2000; Irwin, 2001; Mendes de Almeida, 2000; Sweetman, 1999) – this is only true for relatively small markings. There are more extreme ways of consuming tattoos and body piercings that go beyond the mundane and acceptable butterfly tattoo on the ankle, or an eyebrow piercing. While those minor body marks are socially and physically “safe”, extensive markings are not.

To have, or plan to have, a heavily tattooed body is still taken as an “extreme” decision, only carried out by an ultra-minority of young people. As some research points out, to have large portions of skin inked still evokes ideas of “madness,” “perversion,” “deviation,” and “marginality” (Ferreira, 2003, 2008b). The extreme use of tattoos and body piercing is still generally perceived as abuse of the body, an unnecessary excess that subjects its practitioners to social suspicion. The social history of these practices in deviance and pathology feeds the distrust and fear often manifested towards heavily tattooed and pierced bodies. Such bodies socially incriminate and discredit the young people they belong to; and frame social situations in which they are daily protagonists.

### The Tattooed Body under the Gaze of Others

The epidermis – largest of all the body's organs – is not just the corporeal boundary of the individual, but also the first *contact zone* with the world, subjected by the visibility it has to the gaze of others. Its voluntary modification then suggests a strategy for presenting and representing the individual in the face of others; a representation that provokes or waits for social recognition. As Nancy (2004, 22) points out, the tattoo, for example, “is in the skin, it makes skin: an authentic exposed extension, all of which is turned to the exterior while simultaneously serving as the wrapper for the interior”.

This means the symbolic expressivity of tattooed skin always implies a receiver. The implied receiver is the basis for rigorous social management of the visibility of the corporeal project. Production of tattooed skin includes a will to be seen, to attract looks, whether the tattoos are permanently available to everyone on the “public skin”, or whether they are only accessible to the project's accomplices. In relation to increased demand for body-modification these days, Yan, a 23-year-old male body-piercer covered in tattoos told me, “I think that people have the need to call attention, to say hey, I'm also here! I'm also a living being! I'm also around! I think people have an enormous need to do that”.

The tattooed body thus represents an “aesthetics of presence” (Le Breton 2002, 103) – an aesthetic that stimulates the social gaze, a way of staging an identity in order to fight indifference and to escape the anonymity imprinted on the daily life of the body in contexts of urbanity. When they are made visually available to the public gaze, tattoos draw attention to the social presence of the subject who displays them, granting spectacularity to a body that is brought into evidence and singularised in the eyes of others.

Simmel (1997) conceptualised the urban experience as essentially visual, with initial information about others coming primarily from their appearance. The fact is that the way other people look at the body does play a central part in social exchanges and interpersonal knowledge systems. In an environment dominated by what Simmel (1997, 35) called a “blasé” attitude – itself a reaction to the intensification of sensory stimuli in the extensive metropolis, such inspection,

Leads ultimately to the strangest eccentricities, to specifically metropolitan extravagances of self-distantiation, of caprice, of fastidiousness, the meaning of which is no longer to be found in the content of such activity itself but rather in its being a form of “being different”, of making oneself noticeable. For many types of persons these are still the only means of

saving for oneself, through the attention gained from others, some sort of self-esteem and the sense of filling a position.

SIMMEL (1997), 40

A body – or a considerable part of one – covered in tattoos is likely to incisively focus the attention of others, rupturing the dynamic of impersonality and depersonalisation characteristic of large metropolises. Along the same lines, Diógenes (1998) points to the *voracity of the gaze* in large cities and consequently the power of body image as a driving force in modern societies. She argues that “to look and be looked at becomes the most effective way of making oneself present in the public sphere. This need for ‘social transparency’ makes each individual an actor *par excellence*. Performances, styles, choreographies – in other words, ‘public stage-plays’ make the social event more dynamic”. She observed that this was particularly true for those objectively placed in the “backstage of the social scene”, who frequent more marginal and interstitial urban areas (Diógenes 1998, 181).

The *logic of ostentation* that characterises extensively tattooed bodies reveals an *excess of presence* in its ability to interpellate, to force the other to turn his or her gaze on its bearer and to take that gaze hostage, to mark and demarcate its bearer in the public space by means of the *social shock effect* it causes. The *shock effect* generated by extensively marked bodies corresponds to the “cultural noise” they cause in the life of society. The effect is greater, the further “production grammars” are from “reception grammars” (Véron, 1980). It is in the potential *space for confrontation* between these grammars that a kind of “semiotic guerrilla warfare” (Hebdige 1986, 17–18) can take place and produce a shock effect. This is an aesthetic that stimulates the eye and makes the body a protagonist. This way the subject feels that she or he is “being seen in the world and from the world”, to borrow from Sartre (1998, 339). At the same time as it provokes the eye, the marked body evokes its bearer’s alternative, subterranean world, lending her or him social visibility and breadth of identity.

Marking the body is both a private and public act, an intimate inscription and a public manifestation – that cannot fail to have effects on contexts of social interaction. When the body is tattooed and pierced, it ceases to be a material vestige that “naturally” draws attention, and becomes something that marks and demarcates a particular form of presence, of the subject’s insertion into the world – an effect produced by the aura of transgression and provocation. Despite greater visibility nowadays, a certain shock effect still accompanies body-modifications. Emotional reactions rarely entail indifference. Rather they range from curiosity to distrust, even repugnance. They may generate compliments or hostility, surprise or fear, complicity or mistrust, fascination

or aversion, but they always constitute additional information for the ways in which others perceive, categorise and relate to, the marked subject in face-to-face interactions.

### The Semiotic Splintering of the Tattooed Body

Tattooing as a device for expressing social classification is not new. However, these days the tattooed body is a semantically *disjunctive* reality where meanings are splintered. In the past, perception of a tattooed body was informed by codes that were restricted – both in the context of traditional societies and in the tattoo's stigmatised introduction into western societies. Today the production and reception grammars linked to tattoos are no longer subject to some pre-existent symbolic relationship with social role or status.

Tattoos are polysemic, available for every projection of meaning and every misunderstanding. Not only can the same mark be invested with various intentional meanings by its bearer, but this symbolic density is amplified by a plethora of significances attributed to it by the looks it receives. The textuality of tattooed skin is open; a complex semiotic territory where there can be juxtaposition of contradictory symbolic traits and properties.

Today, tattooed signs convey hybrid messages. We only have to go into a tattoo parlour and look at available catalogues to see how body-marking has entered an unrivalled state of *cultural syncretism*, amalgamating the archaic and the modern, merging designs and materials from different and sometimes antagonistic traditional cultures with the explosive creativity of the contemporary world. Dissociated from their original cultural systems, tattoos are justified by a biographically codified narrative. Even iconographically abstract tribal tattoos, which are the most sought-after at present, lead back to biographical narratives and fuel individual mythologies. Their meanings are founded on traditions that are over-simplified by lack of knowledge about sources, yet are powerful in the projection of a personal identity.

As one of my interviewees, Brian, a 25-year-old male university student, told me:

At that time, those so-called tribal tattoos had a meaning, they used to mark different steps in the development of the man towards adulthood, within that society, within the tribe. Many of them were attributed to people according to their position, according to what the person was within the actual tribe. The hunters would have a right to a certain tattoo, the fishermen would have a right to some, and leaders would have

a right to others. And now, what happens? In so-called Western society, the world of tattooing began absorbing these tattoos, and began creating others inspired by them. (...) The idea is that the design, despite not meaning anything in terms of image, has a meaning in terms of feelings. Tribal tattooing is exactly that. Nowadays, there are people who make tribal tattoos only because of the symbol, because they thought the symbol was funny, because they thought something. Often, people don't have the faintest idea what they are putting on their body. I've seen many people making designs that are typically feminine on masculine bodies. Nobody questions what they are doing.

This account shows how these days tattooing does not refer to the ethnographic or philological fidelity of the original content, about which both tattooist and tattooed may be unaware. Rather, tattooing is an act whose intention involves the intimate sphere of personal desire and taste, notwithstanding the fact that it is commercialised and consumed under the aegis of a mythology of authenticity which evokes the primal roots of Man, *in illo tempore*. When traditional tattoo designs are inscribed on western bodies, this is no more than a formal gesture of simulation, a kind of *cultural quote* (Le Breton 2002, 161).

There is no longer any pre-existing symbolic equation between sign and meaning. The eagle does not necessarily signify freedom, nor the lion strength. The earring in the left ear does not necessarily state the bearer's sexual orientation, nor cobwebs on the elbows a stay in prison, nor a tear at the corner of the eye responsibility for taking a life. It is not that that such conventional equivalences have disappeared from semiotic circulation and consequently ceased to have any social effects. Indeed some of these codes live on and are reproduced in very circumscribed social circuits, in prison, LGBT circles or the armed forces, for example. However, they do not necessarily symbolise these things. Tattoos constitute increasingly fluctuating and arbitrary signs contingent on their bearer's personal biography.

According to Maria, a 32-year-old high school teacher who began being tattooed in her twenties, having an extensively inked body today is different: "[Tattoos] bring out things that we feel. And we let others see what we feel. But others don't know how to interpret them, because the interpretation is exclusively ours; only we know what that actually means". While in the past the message inscribed in the mark was an integral part of the communication system employed by a given group that possessed the code, now interpretation relies on a wide-reaching and complex system of meaning in which different symbolic constellations flow into one another.

### The Confrontation between Current Grammars of Tattoo

The existing systems of meaning for the marked body do not offer any type of consensus about the meanings of the marks. Moreover, they do not in any way guarantee a link between the tattoos' *production grammar* and *reception grammar*. On the contrary, they substantially increase the impossibility of any unified *social semiosis* – a term which Véron (1980) uses to describe the intelligible circulation of any discursive or non-discursive statement between production instances and reception instances, via coincidence between the respective grammars.

In Portugal, outside the subcultural space in which tattoos are produced, there still exists a stereotypical image of them which was constructed over the course of history in the West. This stereotype relies on a perception of body marks as deviant, pathological and masochistic. They still connote delinquency, mortification, mutilation and madness. Tattoos represent a threatening aesthetic that very often gives rise to distrust and fear among subjects who are not very familiar with marked bodies (Ferreira, 2003).

These same categories of perception inform the social classification systems applied to marked subjects. Permanent body inscriptions create an interdependence between “text” and body. They are realities which unify themselves: the person who looks at the body does not separate the text he or she “reads” from the person who carries it. Whatever the interpretation is that informs the eye, it does not limit itself just to the embodied designs and objects, but is immediately extended to the person who bears them.

Tattoos thus constitute a privileged form of social production and identification, inasmuch as they grant their bearers certain symbolic properties. Given the plurality of grammars that are currently available for use in the social interpretation of body inscriptions, there is usually a large semiotic distance – even a total divergence – between the *properties that are individually invested* in the production of the body project and the *properties that are socially attributed* to that same project. This can generate uncomfortable mismatches between the social (attributed) and personal (claimed) identities of the tattooed young person.

It is with reference to this divergence between production and reception grammars; between invested and attributed properties, that it is possible to understand, for example, the frequent parental opposition to body-marking projects adopted by today's youth. As Maria explained, even today, as a 32-year-old female graduate and respected high school teacher, her family is troubled,



My mother, my parents, and perhaps my uncles and aunts and others, associate tattoos and piercing to... “they’re all druggies!” and “they are all robbing shops!” That kind of thing. (...) First I tried to explain that I had nothing to do with the drug scene or anything like that, right? Then I even tried to explain that some of my female students also had some, and that it doesn’t mean anything, period. Perhaps it would have been like that quite a few years ago, but not anymore.

The reception grammars that inform the symbolic properties attributed to bearers of tattoos remain broadly anchored in social information that has been historically accumulated, crystallised and legitimated in relation to tattooing. To a large extent, this information continues to condition the value and meaning of these epidermal inscriptions. It also fuels the social categorisation processes through which adepts are targeted, and fosters social situations in which they are daily protagonists. Tattoos continue to make people think of a social history that incriminates, pathologises and socially discredits people who have them.

The social reputation of a heavily tattooed young person is at risk of *stigma* (Goffman, 1988). Her or his social identity continues to be compromised by *an identity at risk*: the risk of being connoted as something she or he is not, or of overexposing something he or she is and should not be. The extensively marked body is still a *suspicious body*, increasing the likelihood of recriminatory, incriminatory or discriminatory effects for its owner. These effects show in situations of inequality in the way in which society treats the latter, compared to the owners of other, unmarked bodies. Effects occur in their day-to-day circulation and dealings, and in their access to certain social circuits, segments of the labour market and so on. One informant, Susan, had been extensively tattooed since she was 15 years old. Now aged 34, she works as a receptionist and body piercer in a tattoo parlour and as a clerk in a store selling “alternative” clothes. Susan told a long story of social situations that she felt were discriminatory, for example,

People talk a lot about racism in relation to races, but I’m also a victim of that, aren’t I? Because no matter where I go, for example, I don’t get the same customer service in shops as other people do; I have to wait until the girlies get over the giggling, the tomfoolery, all that. Of course, when I go in somewhere (...) people are always distrustful. Actually, that happened to me this morning! I left, and I left on purpose, because I had the security guard always behind me! It’s very strange, but it’s true. (...) And

that happens all the time, in supermarkets and all that, it's common. I'm always being monitored!

Feeling themselves to be constantly observed in daily life is a common experience for those who display tattooed bodies. The *look* is ostensible for the person who feels it in the flesh. In apprehension of the look that is going to come their way, and as successive social experiences suggest to them, they assume that observation will be impregnated with judgemental or categorising processes, often of a negative and stigmatising nature. Others may suspect or accuse the bearer of having a marginal past or present, relegating them to the status of less reputable social figures, like the "inmate", the "druggie", or the "hooker".

The social mechanisms of censure, recrimination and/or incrimination install themselves in daily life precisely "on the basis of the designations, names and classifications that are attributed to the others and the things that escape our immediate understanding of normality. (...) From the moment at which the label circulates as an attribute of the person, this fact cannot fail to lead to psychological and social consequences" (Ferreira 2000, 664). When extensively marked young people like Yan (see above) who was fully covered in tattoos, become aware that they are being looked at, they feel they run the risk of allowing themselves to be defined by the world; of seeing their condition as a *person* being subsumed by their condition as a *figure*:

It's less now, but there is still that tendency for people to judge: "Look, that one has earrings, he's a druggie! That one has tattoos, he was in prison!" There is still a bit of that mentality among people nowadays. (...) I don't like those people who pass me by, look and comment, but in a whispering way. I think it's a bad sign. And I think that that person, right there, is putting me a bit aside. Even if he/she doesn't know me from anywhere, he/she is already setting me apart from everyone else.

When a tattooed young person presumes to see in the eye of the person looking at him or her the value historically associated with marked figures, that look ends up being invested with a structuring power over the young person's attitudes and behaviours. This results from the expectations and predictions the young person formulates with regard to potential social reactions to her or his body. Within this context, when body-marking projects attain an extent that substantially exceeds socially tolerated limits, that visibility becomes the object of social negotiation in given spheres of life (Irwin, 2000).

### Strategies for Socially Managing Public Skin: Confrontation, Avoidance, and Covering Up

Given the reception grammar that still hangs over it, the extensively marked body corresponds to a *commitment to a corporeal place* that *compromises the social place* of the person who has created it. Apart from anything else, such a project compromises its bearer's access to certain social spheres that are more conservative and normative.

The reflexivity underlying the elaboration of these body projects thus includes both an awareness of the risks difference brings with it, and an acknowledgement of conditions for its social visibility. This is a calculation made on the basis of anticipating other people's potential (re)actions. It results in the social management of the body project's public visibility. Along the trajectory of their social experience as extensively marked subjects, these young people gradually learn to be careful about how, when and where their tattooed bodies are going to be admired, merely tolerated, or vehemently repudiated. As Maria, the 32-year-old high school teacher, said: "Essentially what I thought about was what that [the tattooed body] would bring me in the relationship with others – others who were basically my parents. (...) And in fact, they didn't know for quite a while".

In the light of the contingencies they encounter in face-to-face interactions, extensively tattooed subjects develop strategies for socially managing their body projects that entail *confronting* and/or *avoiding* the constraints they come up against in their daily experience. Options depend on their prior assessment of the expected context and protagonists. These are strategies common to people who have a similarly stigmatised "moral career"; a succession of like learning experiences in relation to their discreditable condition, with an equally similar sequence of personal adjustments (Goffman 1988, 41). Aware of the discreditable social condition that a heavily tattooed body can generate for its owner, these young people learn early on to deal with ostensibly recriminatory, suspicious and/or incriminatory looks and reactions, and to challenge and/or avoid them. From the first marks onwards, possible social risks are foreseen and preferably avoided.

*Confrontation strategies* tend to be activated in situations that are momentary, where the young person is not very well prepared. Such situations are experienced primarily with unknown others in daily life. Confrontation strategies are used to manage the social tension generated by the body project's visibility in certain social situations. They may reduce or minimise the effects of stigma and thus make it easier for the subject and others to co-exist. Brian, the 25-year-old male university student informant, gives an account of how

he reacts to looks he presumes express disapproval of his body: "At first I was revolted by the fact that people said this or that... Now it doesn't make any difference whatsoever (...) used to react, yes. It caused me some hassles, but nothing I couldn't get over".

Confrontation strategies can begin by taking the form of a *revolt*, when the young tattooed person confirms reception of the stigmatising look through a break and conflict with the other, to whom he or she reacts with indignation and verbal or even physical violence. However, in a later phase, when faced with reactions, these young people may opt for the confrontation strategy of *indifference*. They devalue the reaction of others by scorning it. Or they may confront with an attitude of *ironic provocation*, as though confirming the aggression and symbolic violence the other has interpreted their body project to contain. As Thomas, a 28-year-old electrician, describes it thus:

When I hear some buzz, like a group of old ladies walks by and I hear: "look at that guy!" And whatever, that's when I suck in a huge greenie to disgust them and hit them with everything I've got! I sort them out there and then! You see, when I feel that people are disgusted with me, that's when I try to disgust them even more. That's my punk attitude to really shock them. The more they don't like it, the more I do for them not to like it.

As this indicates, in certain daily social situations, above all with *generalised others*, the extensively tattooed subject makes a point of affirming and radicalising their individual distinctiveness. They constitute the relationship with the untattooed other in terms of rebellion and provocation. However, in other, more intimate social spheres, the same subject may calculate the possible risks of conflict, tension and/or social sanctions and decide otherwise. He or she may end up slightly betraying their identity in order to reduce or resolve those risks.

*Avoidance strategies* may be employed by extensively tattooed young people who are uncertain about the way in which the social information inscribed on their bodies may be read and the discredit that it may cause. These avoidance strategies seek to neutralise negative reactions. These eminently defensive strategies are characterised by the *prevention* of critical judgements and adverse reactions. That is, implementation of the strategy is foreseen and prepared in advance, so as to facilitate the course of daily interaction with non-tattooed others, and avoid or minimise any possible conflicts.

These are strategies through which the individual adjusts his or her self-image to the other's expectations. Before a social appearance in a given social

sphere or in the presence of certain figures, the young person does some prior translation work, anticipating the reception grammar that may be applied to her or his body and any tensions that may result thereby. As a result of this calculation, the young person may dissimulate his or her body image. *Dissimulation* here refers to the effort that the potentially stigmatised person makes not to impose his or her presence as different – the art of making oneself the same. This provisionally creates a façade that matches the expected identity, as Thomas, the 28-year-old electrician, explains,

I think there is always a certain fear too (...) in relation to possible friendships that I'll make, in relation to their family members. I never quite know how to react towards them. Perhaps the best way is to really conceal things and not show them, so as not to give them a reason to speak, to bother me, to say "but if that guy is like this and so on, I don't like you dating him!" (...) Therefore, so as not to let that happen, I think the best thing is really (...) Well, when I feel like walking around in short sleeves, I walk around in short sleeves. But when I go somewhere like that where I'm not very familiar with people, I put on a shirt or a sweatshirt or something, and I cover my arms.

The avoidance strategy here is not that of managing the tension generated in social contacts, as in confrontation strategies, but of managing information about the differential attribute in question. To reveal or to hide it, where, and to whose eyes it will be shown: these become habitual decisions in the social routine of young people covered in tattoos. More than managing the tension produced by the project's visibility, avoidance strategy tries to manage the social information that is given out by the body and circulates as a result of the looks it encounters. Avoidance strategies entail weighing up and negotiating the public limits of the young person's corporeal expression, such as attempting to keep the body project partially or entirely secret, using techniques that involve "covering up" the façade (Goffman 1993, 72).

It begins with a rigorous weighing up of the *corporeal geography* of the marks, in such a way as to anticipate and prepare for the possibility that the project will remain unknown in social situations which, in principle, imply a greater danger of body-based discrimination. For example, as Yan said of working in his sister's tattoo parlour: "As a rule, we mustn't mark the parts of the body from the wrists to the hands, or from the neck to the head, right? These are the most difficult parts [to conceal]. Nowadays it is always very complicated for a person to find work, isn't it? So society demands that it be that way!"

Prior experience of discrimination produces the effect of social management of the body-marking project so as to be situationally disguised. Given their permanent nature, the inscription of marks, and above all of extensive tattoos, should be avoided on the *public skin*, corporeal territory that is hard to camouflage with clothing. If the forearm to the hand and from the neck upwards is avoided, then it is easy to dissimulate the body project in certain social situations. The most socially risky spheres, in which avoidance strategies are most often implemented, include the *family* sphere and the *work* sphere.

The first body marks, or the corporeal extent to which the project is advancing, are very often hidden from the eyes of the family, as in the case of Patrick, a 28-year-old restaurant cook who still lives with his parents:

[My parents reacted] Badly! Very badly! (...) Even today the reaction continues to be negative. But the exact quantity [of tattoos I have], they also don't know how many there are, or how extensive, because they are limited by what they see and not by what in fact exists. (...) If I need to change clothes for example, I am unable to change in front of my father.

Sarah, a 27-year-old female designer, also described her avoidance strategies in the work environment:

The same thing tends to happen in situations involving job interviews or integration into new working environments: [The piercing in the chin...] It always brings problems, you know?... Every so often I have to take it out. (...) I know that if I go to look for a job, I will have to take it out! (...) Of course if I perceive that the person [who is interviewing me for a job] does not like tattoos, I'm never going to show it, nor will I go to the workplace with the tattoos on display. (...) When I went to the interview for the job that I had previously, the man just stared at my ears; but I was also smart enough to wear my hair loose, so that it wouldn't be that noticeable.

Thus, in the work sphere, avoidance strategies may go as far as the partial or total reconversion of the young person's appearance in favour of the normative. This social integration is necessary for his or her social survival in the working context. Brian, the 25-year-old university student, is working at present in an accounting office:

From the moment at which we entered the labour market, the majority of them [friends with tattoos and piercings] had to give that up in order

to start presenting themselves differently. (...) It is the labour situation that forces many people to give up ways in which they would like to dress or to present themselves. It is the imposed model, it is the stereotype. (...) I am at a moment in my life in which I've had to prostitute myself a bit to the stereotype, to the existing model. And I don't feel okay. I don't feel okay not wearing my earrings. I don't feel okay at having to go to work and having to hide parts of the tattoos – some I can't actually hide, no matter how hard I try. And that hurts!

The world of work configures a social zone in which there come into play normative social constraints on visual appearances which mean that the individual does not always seem to be what he or she is. So this is a space that pushes people to engage in personal reflexivity on the principles of reality (what I can do), duty (what I should do) and will (what I want to do), thus leading to interesting phenomena of *split identities* in the individual performance of social roles (see Goffman, 1993).

In these circumstances it is understandable that extensively tattooed young people perceive and experience the labour market as one of the main spaces in which they are constrained in their ability to develop and publicly assume the body they have. In this sphere of social life, they quite often accept renouncing their authenticity, “being themselves”, in order to manage the potential *recognition deficit* which their body might engender (Schaut, 1999).

Having said this, when they hide their body marks these young people feel that they are being obliged to give up one of the personal traits which they most value and through which they seek to be recognised and valued by others. When the dissimulation occurs, they experience it as an obstacle to their authenticity and individuality – an assault on the full realisation of their identity project. Avoidance strategies cause a major discrepancy between *real social identity* and *virtual social identity* (Goffman 1988, 12).

It is in their daily experience of social discrimination that these young people want to deconstruct the bodily stereotypes rooted in their difference. At the same time they want to collectively legitimate their social normality and moral integrity realised through their capacity to work. In both cases they attempt to restore their condition of being a *person*, not a mere *figure* reduced to a historically and socially discredited corporeal attribute.

### Conclusion

The discussion above allows us to see a major tension that surrounds the material life experiences of young bodies. This tension is between conformity

and alternative production. On the one hand, there is pressure to conform to the ideal notion of the *young body* – a body/object made into a material thing, capitalised on the stage of consumption and fashion, and trafficked in media images and the market. On the other hand we see in the body project the production of corporealities of contestation. Here the body/subjects are criss-crossed by a multiplicity of non-submissive forces that resist the capitalist, standardised programming of the body design industry. The languages and practices of these corporealities of contestation attempt to shatter the system of domination micropolitically, applying a brake to the globalised empire of the *young body*. They refute the prescriptive criteria of “normality” whose rigidity and degree of institutionalisation is capable of turning any radical difference into *stigma*.

The extensively tattooed young person's body, often interpreted in the light of a hegemonic reception grammar as a symptom of a fragile psychological state, actually reflects a fragile form of social *struggle for subjectivity* (McDonald, 1999). It symbolises a fight for the recognition, respect and dignity of a subjectivity constructed on the basis of values of authenticity, singularity and freedom of action.

Therefore, the aesthetic of body marks cannot be seen as an empty and fashionable framing trend. The extensively marked body expresses convictions, values and representations regarding the way in which the subject defines him or herself, both to him or herself and in the eyes of the society in which he or she lives. It expresses symbolic distancing in the face of a world which its user feels restricts her or his action in social space (Ferreira, 2007). In the “ocularcentric” society we live in nowadays (Campos, 2010), we cannot effectively ignore the way in which youth microcultures use the body's visuality in its aesthetic, kinetic and sensorial excesses as a privileged space in which to affirm their identity. Here they play and take pleasure, but also fight for a place in the world, claiming a space in which to exist as a *singular* (“be different”), *authentic* (“be myself”) and *free* (“be who I want to”) person; to present and have themselves represented in the world.

From this perspective there is an urgent need to broaden the research on body-expression formats adopted by young people, those through which they try to surreptitiously introduce a degree of disorder into the imposed corporeal order. Response to the question put forward by Lopes – “What body for what society?” (2004) implies questioning not only the canons of the *legitimate body* in each space/time and the respective ways in which legitimacy is constructed, but also the canons of bodies that figure as less legitimate or *illegitimate* in their respective spaces of production, reception and social experience. “The body is only the ‘measure of all things’ if we understand the modalities by which the body conforms and deforms the dominant order”



(Lopes 2004, 124). One of these modalities is the political aesthetic of the body-marking project.

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