

Rhetorics of *Display*



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Tattoo and Piercing

Reflections on Mortification

In such cultures, it might be argued, the skin, the border zone between the bounded self and the social world thought to encompass that self, a membrane that protects but may also conceal, must be a zone of fascination and danger of a particularly charged kind.

Susan Benson¹

On most days, but especially in the summer, when people wear less concealing clothing, tattoos pass us on the street, wait on us at tables, gaze back at us from magazines and television screens, flaunt themselves on the beach. We see Maori armbands, Chinese characters, bellicose dragons, delicate rosebuds. In a duplicating reflexive mode, as tattoos appear on more bodies, the media report on them, the fad spreads further—in a seemingly unending cycle. Many models (Linda Evangelista, Christy Turlington, or Tyson Beckford, a striking Ralph Lauren male model, to name a few) are photographed with their tattoos prominently displayed. Celebrities, like Eminem, but including basketball, movie, and rock stars, sport tattoos, spawning growing circles of imitators and copycats. A-list Madonna allows her tattoo to be seen; down the list Drew Barrymore has a page on a tattoo Web site. The tattoo has become an emblem of transformation that visually announces the bearer's new identity. There are specials on tattoos run on National Public Radio and some of the cable channels. Every week it seems that the newspapers carry some sort of tattoo item. Some are short fillers, like the one about the ex-marine who sued a tattoo parlor for spelling "villain" incorrectly on his arm. Others are featured stories, such as one describing the painful process of tattoo removal.

Somewhat surprising in the context of the growing phenomenon of tattoos, mature bourgeois women are getting tattooed, though as yet nothing approaching the numbers of teenagers, college students, and yuppies. Middle-class women sport both open and concealed tattoos—on upper back edge of shoulder (to be displayed when a wide-neck shirt slips) or on the stomach (near the navel, for low trousers) or on the ankle (to catch the downward roving eye). In other words, the gender and class of those getting tattooed has changed: from mostly men to almost equal numbers of women; from people at the periphery (convicts, gang members, punks, sailors, prostitutes, circus freaks) to members of the

establishment. Mark C. Taylor, an art history professor at Williams College, notes that except for a brief popularity “among European royalty and aristocrats at the turn of the [twentieth] century,” tattoos have “generally been associated with marginal individuals and social groups.”² Taylor refers to an early benchmark of modernism, the 1908 essay on “Ornament and Crime” by Adolph Loos, in which the latter went so far as to say that he who was tattooed was “either a criminal or degenerate aristocrat. If someone who is tattooed dies in freedom, then he does so a few years before he would have committed murder.”³ Whatever the brief spurt of interest among a tiny elite group and the prison population, it was not until the late twentieth century that we have seen the growth of the phenomenon among the masses.

These introductory remarks place the author on the outside, as one gazing at the phenomena of tattooing and piercing, a scopophilic who loves to see visual variety. The chapter is not based on first-person experience nor does it attempt to take the point of view from inside the tattooed or pierced body. To the outsider, the differences between tattoo and piercing are located in areas of emphasis and focus.

Tattoo and piercing often blend into one entity, one category, in public perception. Both require the skin to be pierced, though in varying degrees. Both are ways of decorating/transforming the body. The fact that “tattoo parlor” is the generic term for a place where tattooing and piercing take place also helps us think of the two as parts of the same phenomenon. What remains unseen is that both practices are symbolic acts of transformation through what Kenneth Burke called “mortification.”

A Burkean reading shows that both tattooing and piercing are symbolic acts that expiate hierarchical guilt through purifying acts of mortification. Both the tattooed and the pierced have enacted dramas of transformation and redemption. The convict’s racist epithets and the schoolgirl’s rose, the barbell in the tongue and the ring in the nose, are enactments of a symbolic mortification ritual that purifies those who wear them and leaves a lasting display of their identification with and place within some desired tribe.

The first three sections of this chapter offer a focused examination of Burke’s ideas in relation to tattooing and piercing: (1) Burke’s redemptive model of communication and how it accounts for tattooing and piercing as purifying symbolic actions; (2) Burke’s analysis of redemptive identification as a prime motive of symbolic action in general and, thus, of tattooing and piercing specifically; and (3) based on Burke’s explanation of “division,” my consideration of concealment as part of display, with attention to visibility and placement as important variables. The next three sections presuppose Burke’s theory while considering special issues associated with tattooing or piercing: (4) the popularity of tattoos as corporeal emblems of transformation; (5) the significance of the concepts “civilized” and “primitive” as they bear upon tattoos and piercings; and (6) the phenomenon of piercing considered as more extreme (literally, deeper) than tattooing.

Burke’s Model of Redemption

On the topic of the growing and widespread phenomenon of the tattoo in the Western world, a culture critic could begin by speculating on postmodern eclecticism—in other words, the acquirer of tattoos is choosing his expression, perhaps from the “primitives.” A Freudian might continue with a discussion of tattoos in terms of fetishism. Or, going a different route, the film scholar could approach the subject on the basis of visual pleasure.

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Scopophilia, Freud's term for just what the root words mean, love of looking, is closely connected to the idea of the primacy of the eye/vision/visual that art historians write about. Tattoo as art. The social scientist might hypothesize the postglobalization need for community—in other words, McLuhan's global community with Vietnam in your living room is only virtual reality; one still needs the community of material others of flesh and blood. Indeed, McLuhan might claim that the practices of tattooing and body piercing are emblems of a new tribalism that, he predicted, would permeate the new postliterate, media age. But Kenneth Burke would draw attention to these practices as enactment of symbolic dramas laced through and through with human motivations. It is instructive to read Burke again.⁴

Burke would contend that human communication is predominantly a symbolic drama enacted to alleviate guilt and to achieve redemption.⁵ Humans as symbolizing beings are "goaded by a spirit of hierarchy" and "moved by a sense of order."⁶ Hierarchy involves authority, levels of authority, and individuals up and down those levels.⁷ Individuals caught in the pull of hierarchic impulses to move up, down, and across symbolic "orders" are simultaneously moralized by the negative, by the incompatible and often competing rules, norms, and strictures that define their relationships to the hierarchies that permeate their daily lives.⁸ Since, as Burke points out, it is impossible to obey all hierarchical "thou shalt nots," individuals find themselves caught between competing commitments, desires, and values. Inevitably they violate "commandments" and undergo a secular version of the Fall. The experience of one's own imperfections, flaws, and limitations in the face of exacting and often competing hierarchical strictures culminates in the awareness of one's own transgressions, or "pollution," to use Burke's vocabulary. One suffers guilt, as Burke would have it, and the guilty turn to symbolic acts of identification in pursuit of redemption.⁹

There are two kinds of redemptive identification through which the "guilty" undergo a purifying symbolic rebirth: "victimage" and "mortification." Victimage achieves symbolic rebirth by transferring guilt for one's own "pollution" onto some external "vessel" or "scapegoat" that, through symbolic sacrifice, purges that guilt. Burke defined the projection device in his classic study of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*:

... the "curative" process that comes with the ability to hand over one's ills to a scapegoat, thereby getting purification by dissociation. This is especially medicinal, since the sense of frustration leads to a self-questioning. Hence, if one can hand over his infirmities to a vessel or "cause," outside the self, one can battle an external enemy instead of battling the enemy within.¹⁰

The second kind of redemptive identification involves confronting one's pollution through an act of mortification, an act of self-sacrifice that "cleanses" one's self of guilt. As Burke explains it, mortification "must come from within. The mortified must, with one aspect of himself, be saying no to another aspect of himself."¹¹

Though the redemptive dramas enacted through tattooing and body piercing involve both kinds of identification, this chapter will stress how those practices are purifying acts of self-sacrifice, or mortification, that yield visible emblems of transformation, or rebirth. One reason for this emphasis is that tattooing and body piercing are, in varying degrees, overt and quite literal acts of mortification in the sense of self-willed mutilation, or direct violation of the body. These practices thus resonate with the theologically tinged meaning

of mortification that, as Burke puts it, involves "subjection of the passions and appetites, by penance, abstinence or painful severities inflicted on the body."¹² In varying degrees, the practices of tattooing and body piercing involve voluntary, self-chosen infliction of bodily pain that requires, according to Burke, "a kind of governance, an extreme form of 'self-control,' the deliberate disciplinary 'slaying' of any motive that, for 'doctrinal reasons,' one thinks of as unruly."¹³ Though there are many useful studies of Burke's guilt-purification-redemption cycle,¹⁴ few examine the purifying symbolism of overt, literal acts against the bodies of others (through acts of scapegoating) or of ourselves (through acts of mortification).¹⁵

For example, the prisoner has gone against authority, rejected the morality of his society, is made to feel guilty for his crime and also for his difference (or his lawless indifference); in prison, his act of crying out a loud, metaphorical "no" takes the form of a nonverbal gesture of defiance—a tattoo. That it is an act against the establishment (because he is not allowed the tools for tattooing, he must find or make some kind of sharp instrument to prick himself and acquire the ashes to rub into the wound) does not lessen the fact that in a Freudian way he is also punishing himself, inflicting pain on himself in the process, or, as Burke defines mortification, "carrying-out . . . judgments pronounced . . . against the self."¹⁶ In terms of the position of the subject—the man in prison—his act of tattooing himself is an act of mortification, his wish to purify himself. And, part of his action is motivated by his wish to be accepted into the normative order of prison inmates, an inversion of the conventional, law-abiding order.¹⁷

At the same time, to the subject (the prisoner), the tattoo is a symbol of his victimage by society/authority. Here I should point out that although Burke speaks of "property," as making for "embarrassments,"¹⁸ an individual's body is his property, even if he owns nothing else, and property that cannot be physically taken away from him short of death. From society's point of view, the control of the prisoner's body at some level is scapegoating, which purifies society. The authority (the legal system) does make claims on his body by putting it behind bars, limiting his movements, and does so definitively when it takes his life. In other words, the act of tattooing himself is an act that announces his proprietary interest in his own body. But the act also becomes redemptive, from the objective point of view, in the sense of catharsis it bestows on the law-abiding viewer. His incarceration is a "ritual resolving of civic tensions,"¹⁹ and the tattoo is a symbolic acknowledgment of his antisocietal stance. Or one could say, as Burke does, that it is "'redemption' through *victimage*."²⁰ The public can achieve a kind of "social cohesion" by focusing on one who has drawn attention to himself by means of the symbolic tattoo, figuratively renaming himself as a transgressor. (Though fewer and fewer law-abiding citizens have a continuing problem with tattoos, nevertheless, historically those who wore them seemed like thugs or pariahs outside the acceptable bounds of society.) To state a generalized paradigm: the tattooer mortifies his flesh, whereby he becomes a societal scapegoat. But we must qualify that generalization to include the fact that the fashion model or the trendy teenager might not have the same motive as the convict. More than likely, they identify solely with their own subset among the tattooed while rejecting any or some "other" subset. Even in diverse subsets, however, the individual's conflict involves turning one part of the self against the purportedly polluted other part. The mortification mechanism remains the same.

Redemptive Identification as a Motive of Rhetoric

Central to redemption is the concept of identification that is based on the dual need for transformation and for community. Burke uses *Samson Agonistes* to introduce the subject of identification, specifically Milton's own "identification with a blind giant who slew himself in slaying enemies of the Lord" (an identification between Puritans [Milton] and Israelites [Samson], Royalists and Philistines). He highlights "a more complicated kind of identification: here the poet presents a motive in an essentially magnified or perfected form, in some way tragically purified or transcended; the imagery of death reduces the motive to *ultimate* terms [Burke's italics]." In other words, the imagery of slaying enacts a symbolic process of purification through transformation. Burke takes the "imagery of slaying (slaying of either the self or another)" as a "special case of transformation, and transformation involves the ideas and imagery of *identification*."²¹ Thus, Samson's slaying of himself is a way to transform himself, but it also is a way for Milton to put himself into the action within the Samson story, thus achieving purifying transformation of his self through identification with the righteousness of Samson's cause and with his towering strength, more moral, even, than physical.

Following Burke's model, a person who acquires tattoos identifies with those who wear tattoos; one who pierces, with those who are pierced. The putative tattooer wants to transform himself, not just to acknowledge some inner change, but to make a noticeable statement, to display what I later call a "corporeal emblem of transformation." We cannot underestimate the need to be noticed. "Hey, look at me. I've changed." She/he wants to be thought of as someone who has not conformed to the norm, mere ordinariness to her/his way of thinking. Considered in these terms, the tattooed person gets to enjoy her/his in-your-face statement of difference. She/he becomes one with all those who are tattooed, who are protesting or, at the very least, resisting some aspect of the dominant society. Tattooing is a way of marching in the Gay Pride Day parade even if one is heterosexual. Transformations could be gender pronouncements: unempowered women motivated to look more like macho men. Or they could be self-criticizing proclamation: the unnoticed woman or man opting to declare her or his sexual appeal. Or class longings: liberated bourgeois determined to look more like underclass workers. Or age impersonations: young punks needing to look like more intimidating older punks, at the same time that middle-aged men and women yearn to join the youth culture.

Burke's identification is associated with what he calls "consubstantiality"; when one person identifies with another, the ambiguity remains that he is "'substantially one' with a person other than himself," while at the same time "he remains unique, an individual locus of motives . . . both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another."²² This ambiguity would be one way of explaining the diversity among the people who get tattooed. They are consubstantial in their need to show how they are one with a group, part of a community, but they still remain distinct as individuals, having had their own unique histories for transforming themselves. Burke reminds us that "[w]e need never deny the presence of strife, enmity, faction as a characteristic motive of rhetorical expression."²³ Indeed, he delves into "the possibilities of identification in its *partisan* aspects . . . ways in which individuals are at odds with one another, or become identified with groups more or less at odds with one another . . . [at odds because] 'identification' is . . . to confront

the implications of *division*.²⁴ Burke's insight is to see in the concept of identification "its ironic counterpart: *division*."²⁵ He states the paradox: "Put identification and *division* ambiguously together, so that you cannot know for certain just where one ends and the other begins, and you have the characteristic invitation to rhetoric."²⁶ Born into one order, the person acquiring the tattoo is joining another. Among paradoxes, consider that the tattoo is its own form of conformity—that is, conformity to another norm—at the same time that it is usually perceived by both the tattooed and the viewer as rebellion against the status quo, whatever it is, since the status quo is at any given moment made up of differences.

Division, Display, Concealment

I have shown that Burke points to the operation of *division* within one person. For example, the convict is mortifying himself in ways that divide him from his old conventional, law-abiding life at the same time that he is purifying himself within the prison hierarchy. Each individual is divided between the wish to transform himself *and* the Fall ("pollution") that accompanies the transformation, hence, the need to purify himself. I shall consider next how Burke's account of *division* extends to concealment as part of the manifestation of visual display.

Featured in an article in *Time* magazine on John William King, the white supremacist who dragged African American James Byrd Jr. to his death in east Texas, are photographs of King, one fully dressed without a sign of tattooing on his face and neck and one that shows a partial torso, mainly his underarm and upper arm, densely covered, "cataloguing some of King's racist tattoos, which cover 65% of his skin."²⁷ King is the kind of marginal person who acquired his tattoos while serving time in prison. And he is an example of one kind of concealment. You cannot see his tattoos when he is clothed to appear in court. But when he was arrested, the tattoos became public. The prosecution used their content—hate messages and signs—in their opening presentation against him. But his tattoos cannot be seen unless he is stripped of clothing; they are not supposed to be seen unless he means them to be seen. When they are seen, they are self-display as confrontation. When they are seen, he presents himself as a monster. Though a felon generally loses his rights to privacy, still, one wonders if he is not entitled to privacy when he has deliberately concealed markings on his body. In another close-up of a hate tattoo, an arm is thrust out from behind bars, with a swastika prominently featured inside the crook of the elbow (an attempt at concealment?). The essay that follows this lead photo states that prison guards are often racist, so except for the fact that the arm is extended out from behind the bars, it could be the arm of a guard. The ambiguity is worth noting. On the next page, the caption for a photograph of tattooed prisoners states that "inmates of most American prisons tend to segregate themselves into race-based gangs."²⁸

Of course, such tattoos often are revealed for the impact they will have on viewers. Figure C15 exhibits a hate tattoo, confrontationally racist, intense—a flash, or a tattoo design on paper that customers can choose from. What social circumstances led to this flash? It is clearly anti-Asian: the eyes, specifically Chinese; the queue. Was it created in the context of the glut of railroad workers taking jobs away from Americans, white men who had arrived in the West a short while earlier? What is clear is that it goes against the values of the social norm in its violence, assuming the values of the hegemonic, white Christian—that is, it is not only a head severed at the neck, but cleaved in two as an added gratuitous measure.

One assumes that hate tattoos today express the wearer's racism. Defiance is often a motivation, as are related reactions of protest, resistance, and rebellion against the authorities, the establishment. That tattoos are permanent, or at least troublesome to remove, makes them even more defiant. The permanence of tattoos is critical. It is not as if one could say, "Could you remove your offensive tattoo please?" (as one might ask the thoughtless theatergoer to take off her hat). Clearly the need to make a statement applies generally to the marginalized groups I have named. But the individual sense of alienation that most people share to some degree is what led to their marginalization in the first place. And the marginalized tend to end up in groups to achieve some sense of belonging, of community. The reinforcement of individual alienation to group marginalization to group alienation seems to be a dynamic progression that continues.

Generally speaking, certain kinds of images are hidden. Usually, their statement is too extreme in some way; most people would consider them offensive. King's are too racist. Others are too erotic, pornographic, brutal, violent. One man in a tattoo parlor pulled up his pant leg to show me an erect penis the length of his shin, a small, out-of-scale cowgirl rider impaled on it.

On the other hand, the need to *display* the hidden is always there. I recently heard of a woman who has a large pair of beautiful sinuous carp covering her entire back, perhaps following some old Japanese design. Yet she wanted to display her tattoo, which was on a normally private part of her. The massage therapist thought the client came for a massage because she needed someone to see them.

The question of whether to display or conceal and the urge to have it both ways have led to an uneasy tension illustrated in a matchbook cover found in a bar (see figure 29).

Burke's discussion of division can be extended to consider the divisions among the different bodies that are tattooed. Keep in mind that the rhetoric of tattoos is not rooted in words so much as in the display of images on the body, a wide variety of different images in different styles. There is no agreement that the same image means the same thing to different wearers. Generally, display sites depend on personal preference (unless they are club



29. To reveal or conceal? An uneasy tension

or gang related). Further, the idea of display is complicated by the strategies of concealment even though they are ultimately about display. Possibly somewhere along the way, a wearer discovered that concealing the tattoo could still deliver the satisfaction of being a rebel, albeit a secret one. One has only to view the range of what is being displayed, the motivation behind individual choices, the sites of various displays, including what most of us consider very private parts, to realize that the notion of concealment is merely a way to limit the more public aspects of display, to save secrets for the favored few. Showing or concealing can be seen as part of the larger dialectic, or we can understand them in terms of Burke's "ironic counterpart," the division (one of many divisions) possible within the tattooed.

A very large division is the one between underclass tattoos and bourgeois/fashion tattoos. The media treat these two groups differently, tending to exploit the tattoos of criminals and punks by making the tattoo the entire point of the photo. Candid photos of movie stars and models that picture them with their tattoos showing, on the other hand, do not focus on the tattoos per se; they are merely present, at most secondary to beautiful hair blowing in the wind or the person with whom the star is chatting.

Another way of categorizing the divide is to point to those who acquired tattoos: historically involving few in number, currently endemic in its popularity. Surely there is a difference between these groups, some would challenge. I would argue only in degree in terms of a need for *transformation*. The non-tattooed wonder: why insist on a permanent rose when one could choose to change to a lily, to a daisy, to a plumeria, or to a dragon for that matter, in washable colors? But the fashion statement of tattoos for a Linda Evangelista or a Christy Turlington might mean: I'm giving up the rapid transience of fashion, a different outfit for each walk on the runway, a different look for each designer, occasion, or season, for the very permanence that the non-tattooed have a hard time understanding.

Corporeal Emblems of Transformation

I asked the psychotherapist Janna Malamud Smith, who wrote a book on privacy, *Private Matters*, a basic question.²⁹ Why did she think tattoos had become such a fetish? She speculated that perhaps "most people feel too anonymous and want to have something that announces them." She added, "I suppose it somehow says your body is yours. Someone else looks, but you've been there first."³⁰ It seems reasonable to see this need to assert an identity, assert one's claim to one's own body, and to suggest that tattooing can be seen as a landmark along the lifelong path of establishing identity.

In a more formal mode, Susan Benson, in a fine, even-handed essay on contemporary tattoo and piercing in Europe and America, comes to a similar conclusion, building on Alfred Gell's insightful analysis and theory in his study of Polynesian tattoos: "the puncturing, cutting and piercing of the skin; the flow of blood and the infliction of pain; the healing and closure of the wound; and the indelible trace of the process, a visible and permanent mark on yet underneath the skin . . . [create] 'an inside which comes from the outside . . . the exteriorization of the interior which is simultaneously the interiorization of the exterior.'"³¹ Benson emphasizes the idea of interiority by examining cultures such as the European and American, where she finds that "self-realization and self-mastery . . . central to conceptions of personhood" lie within the person, or "inside." "In such cultures," she continues, "it might be argued, the skin, the border zone between the bounded self and the social world thought to encompass that self, a membrane that protects but may also conceal, must be a zone of fascination and danger of a particularly charged kind."³² This is

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a compelling view of the appeal of tattoos. She arrives at the point, where Burke considers motives, in her own way: "[In the United States there is] a kind of *corporeal absolutism* [my italics]: that it is through the body and in the body that personal identity is to be forged and selfhood sustained."³³

Corporeal absolutism leads to the idea that one can transform identity if one changes the body. Tattoos and body piercings are corporeal emblems of transformation that at once symbolize purgation of some undesired feature from oneself and purification through identification with some alternate, normative order. Consider, for example, how less-confrontational tattoos display a less-confrontational but nonetheless self-transformative project. Many of the people getting tattooed are conscious of tattoos merely as a fashion statement. At their most visible, tattoos decorate the body as clothes do. We wear clothes because it is the custom among "civilized" countries to do so. That said, we make the wearing of clothes into statements or displays of our personal attractiveness, our sexuality, our economic status, our aesthetic taste, ourselves. Even when the clothes are hidden most of the time, as in underwear, we might buy at Victoria's Secret. Many women who have tattoos consider them sexy, not unlike lace underwear. Sexuality is simultaneously endorsed and condemned by the self-contradictory bourgeoisie that most people claim to have come from. So the spirit of rebellion against the stodgy, puritanical tendency of the entrepreneurial class is recombined with the wish for freedom from constraints and freedom of self-expression, in the manner of Helen Gurley Brown's sermon of transformation that is the strategy for selling *Cosmopolitan*. The popularity of both the image of the *Cosmo* girl and the magazine tells the story.

Burke speaks of "autonomous" activities: "The fact that an activity is capable of reduction to intrinsic, autonomous principles does not argue that it is free from identification with other orders of motivation extrinsic to it . . . [it is] in the region of rhetoric when considering the identifications whereby a specialized activity makes one a participant in some social or economic class. 'Belonging' in this sense is rhetorical."³⁴ The office worker now turned *Cosmo* girl belongs to a new and, she perceives, trendier group.

One used to take for granted that wishing to "belong" meant upwardly striving. But today, "belonging" can be downwardly mobile, as among certain liberal, economically comfortable women whose yearning to belong to some utopian idea of sisterhood allies them with welfare mothers, minimum-wage earners. At the same time, for years haute couture has been borrowing from street kids. In the complex world of fashion, the white middle class, in part copying high-society/jet-set/fashion-designer fashion, appropriates as well a certain look from black ghetto kids or punks or the noticeably marginalized, who in turn have been influenced (and are openly appealed to) by high cost design (as in two-hundred-dollar sneakers). The tattoo has become that kind of fashion look. Although fashion per se dilutes the tattoo intention of ex-cons or Hell's Angels, still those who choose to be tattooed for fashion's sake know what the connotations of tattoos are and evidently are willing, if not fully consciously, to be lumped with the stereotypes that had already been established: rebel/outlaw/counterestablishmentarian.

It is difficult to find order in the seeming incoherence of tattoo images among contemporary youth and middle-class women. Women seem to be striving for something not connected to the typically male tattoos, caught as they are between the old, underclass images and the new uses of "other"/ritual symbols. There is a trend among young men to display Chinese characters that mean some abstract quality such as "strength." However, it is

notable that they cannot read the images with which they adorn themselves. Permanent they may be, but unreadable to wearer or viewer, who must rely on the tattoo "artist" to be the dependable authority for getting the "authentic" meaning. The hazard of misinterpretation is at least as present as physical infection. There is also a trend among young men to copy the fierce look of primitive warriors. Perhaps these signs are part of the new-age spirituality, feeling the "magic," the spirit of the symbol. Many of those who are tattooed stress the celebratory nature of their acquisition of tattoos. I assume it is a celebration of their freedom to express themselves in the way they choose. That this celebration requires initial pain returns us to the Burkean notions of purification and the quest for redemption.

Burke would take as a given, that in order to assert our individuality (always a high priority in being American) or feel as if one is an innovator, we insist on some announcement, some *display*, of "this is me." In the specific case of women's bodies as a locality to be illustrated, I would suggest that claiming the body as the site of the display might have been furthered by the feminist movement's emphasis on the concept of *Our Bodies / Ourselves* (1970), the title of a central document/book for the movement. The right to abortion is one aspect of reclaiming our bodies; the right to fulfilling female sexual desires is another. The theater event *The Vagina Monologues* is yet another (the repeated calls for audiences to shout "cunt"—eighteen thousand voices in the 1999 performance at Madison Square Garden—toned down to "vagina" in some university productions, is a strategy to raise consciousness, to reaffirm one's body without shame). And tattoos could be said to belong in this category, too. Hence we see the rise of tattoos on intellectual, mature women. An extreme image of individual female rights also illustrates the division between (open) display and (sometime) concealment. There are women with radical mastectomies who celebrate with tattoos where their breasts used to be. These tattoos are normally hidden under their clothing, as their breasts were when they had breasts. But in order to make the big statement, they proudly exhibit them at parades, for photographs.³⁵

A Dialectic: Civilized versus Primitive

We are used to thinking that wearing clothes is "civilized." Civilized, as opposed to primitive, is a loaded word. It is analogous to the range of meaning of "Culture" with an uppercase C, representing high culture à la Matthew Arnold (or "Kultur," as Ezra Pound called it) versus "culture" with a decidedly lowercase c, as anthropologists use the term, meaning "the concepts, habits, skills, arts, instruments, institutions, etc. of a given people in a given period."

It is now politically correct to give all cultures (lowercase c) an equal status, not privileging one culture as "civilized" over another as "primitive." The fact is that the recent renewed interest in body decoration among all groups is a real phenomenon of the late twentieth century, with no end in sight in the twenty-first. And I might reiterate here that Burke would see all tattooing and piercing, including in non-Western cultures, as a mortification ritual. We tend to see more clearly when our culture is estranged from original practices. Body decoration is a site where one can observe what happens when (old dichotomies of) civilized and primitive coincide, when (old dichotomies of) bourgeois and fringe classes seem in collusion, when high art and popular—even low—art come together. In an unexpected way, body decoration has become a visual rhetoric of liberty, equality, and fraternity, at the same time that it is an expression of globalization.

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Indigenously, Americans have always been inordinately fond of visible signs—in Puritan times, the big white mansion on the hill was a visible sign of grace. It was a public display of God's blessings on (and this was the point) a man of virtue. By the late twentieth century, among a large group of the innerly disaffected, tattoos and piercings had become visible signs of dissatisfaction with hegemonic culture. The surface is cool, so cool we do not have to be heated in our discussion of what's wrong with the world and the older generation; we wear our disaffection and disdain on our body. Man, y'know? Worn on the outside, the surface is what you get; it is a way to exhibit deeper meaning. Or, is the unarticulated emblem all there is to it? The tattoo began as a visible sign of the rebel, a badge of difference. One could observe that a plethora of wearers of the same badges becomes its own conformity.

Taylor explains that at the end of the nineteenth century, one of the contributing factors to tattooing was the "emergence of the field of anthropology" and "the creation of ethnographic museums."³⁶ Europe had never seen anything like the artifacts brought back from Africa, Asia, and the South Pacific and, in archetypal Eurocentric hubris, named the art and the culture brought back from the field "primitive." As Taylor says, "European modernism invented itself by inventing primitivism."³⁷ It is invention in this sense: once having seen the exotically different, we label it primitive, thus transforming the objectivity of what we have seen into our subjective notion of what primitive is. Like Said's Orientalism, we declare *this* is what the "other" is. Taylor goes on to state plainly what the words imply: "Primitivism represents the infantile state of humanity and modernism epitomizes maturity."³⁸ In this argument, whereas the primitive, the child, knows only to do his thing, Picasso (like those who elect to be tattooed) *chooses* to include the "primitive."

To continue from Taylor's lead, clearly *National Geographic* magazine contributed to the availability of images that were "primitive." Many of us saw our first fully naked men and women in the *National Geographic*, and they were always in the context of the modern West looking at the exotic, primitive "other" in godforsaken corners of the world. The exchange of goods globally includes the commodification of body art. Might not viewing photographs of scarification, still practiced among peoples in Africa, initiate a new fashion practice among those affected by its aesthetic? In several firsthand accounts that I have read, the person getting a tattoo mentioned the *National Geographic* as a first awakening to the culture of body transformations.

New primitivism is a dissatisfaction with civilized life. But often that progresses to a need for community, a yearning for return to "better" earlier times. Except now, you no longer have to be born into the tribe; you can choose to join the tribe. It becomes a new tribalism—tribalism borrowed, colonialized, and the result of globalization. Globalization has taught us, and we have learned, to identify with "others," with wanting to show our ability to reconnect with the essential biorhythms by looking like them as, for instance, Rasta dreadlocks adopted by blond kids.

Some Thoughts about Piercing

The avant-garde exhibitions of the seventies had an impact on the piercings that were to follow in their wake. As Taylor phrases it, conceptual art extended "abstraction to dematerialization. . . . As a counter to the veneration of abstraction and immateriality, the body artist offers his or her own flesh and blood as the artistic medium."³⁹ There is the hearsay

of a video performance that showed a German artist slicing his penis, piece by piece; others claim that this demonstration, in fact, never occurred. The media disseminate actual and rumored images and happenings with the speed of sound. Here, too, imitation plays a part.

In both tattoo and piercing, we have an emblem of difference from the majority, the mainstream, the social norm; an emblem of identification as a member of the fuck-you group, an emblem of what the owner considers beautification and decoration. So display is certainly part of it. Like the tree crashing in the forest, there is no sound if no one is there to hear it. Tattoos and piercings must be acquired, and they are meant to be seen, if not by all, at least by someone. A piercing of the clitoris would certainly be known to her lover; but in a photograph, it is also displayed to a photographer, and in books that feature extreme piercing, to untold numbers of readers.

But tongue piercings, nipple and penis piercings, and tattoos (on the rump, for example) that are covered by clothes are clearly not meant to be seen by the world—only by certain people, for erotic purposes; they are meant to turn your partner on. Here, we enter a world that is normally relegated to pornography. Is part of the titillation that here we are really on the edge of a precipice? Like the climber of Everest or the dope addict, how far can we go and still return from the journey? As a researcher in this subject, when will I have to close my eyes? We have taken the whole journey from scopophilia to scopophobia.

Piercing can be seen as a more extreme form of tattooing, which itself requires piercing but at a shallower level (one millimeter deep). And, as I mentioned earlier, the fact that “tattoo parlor” is the generic term for a place where both tattooing and piercing take place helps us think of the two as similar. We tend to think of tattooing versus piercing as yet another example of division within identification: some people identify with tattooers, while others identify with piercers. The rhetoric of the pierced true believer emphasizes pride in difference, ability to take pain, but the repulsion of the critical spectator, the unconvinced, is expressed in pejorative analysis. The effects of piercing on the outsider are consistently more intense than reactions to tattoo.

Piercing penetrates deeper into the body, beyond the skin, into the flesh. Gell’s “interiorization of the exterior” is taken to an extreme degree. Piercing has almost all the requisites for “pure” mortification: punishing one’s body through pain; a relative lack of other considerations such as the aesthetic (the tattooed one’s belief that his designs are beautiful or that they enhance his look in terms of desirability or fashion). The motives for piercing include some need to make private pain public. Rueckert uses two examples of self-victimage: one is of a nun who “flagellates herself in the privacy of her cell to mortify the flesh (to negate . . . what her creed tells her is a negative)” and the other is of a “holy man in India . . . [who] does public penitential acts, who somersaulted fifty miles.”⁴⁰ While Rueckert does not develop the notion of difference between the two acts of self-victimage—the one private and the other public—the examples open our eyes to what is happening today. The private is moving into the arena of the public.

Early Christian saints and martyrs mortified their flesh, or were mortified, for religious reasons and died for their beliefs. The icon of an ecstatic St. Sebastian pierced all over by arrows still sticking in his body is a particular kind of Christian archetype—painful suffering in the flesh for ultimate union with God. Because an alarming number of early Christians rushed to martyrdom in their zeal to be redeemed, St. Augustine felt it necessary to

condemn suicide. In general, historically, exception has been made for mortifiers among religious penitents, but the more extreme phenomena among those who claim neither belief nor cult have been regarded as irrational. Until recent times, slashing oneself, piercing oneself, or mortifying one's own flesh were cause enough to assure one's place in an asylum for the insane. And yet literal mortification continues to exist in "decorative" piercing.

In the name of beautification, many cultures have had customs that have offended other cultures: plugs in ears or lips, elongating the neck, scarification, foot binding. Some mutilations are in the name of health and religious morality, such as circumcision or clitorrectomy. These all alter the body unnaturally.

Is piercing decoration or mutilation? Let us consider first its least extreme form. Tattooing is a kind of piercing with color added. As we consider, keep in mind what else society "allows" or "tolerates": painting the lips, shaving (facial, body, pubic), waxing, electrolysis hair removal, plastic surgery (face-lifting, nose jobs, eye jobs, liposuction, breast implants—whether silicone or salt water in plastic bags—the latest Botox injections). In the documentary *The Eyes of Tammy Faye* (2000), directed by Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato, we learn in the course of the film portrait that Tammy Faye, the ex-television evangelist, cannot be given a makeover look because her eyebrows and lip outline are tattooed on, are permanent. Only a degree of difference raises questions and tests viewer boundaries. Tattoos make boundaries unstable. What, then, about acts of piercing through tissue other than skin—piercing, pricking, entering? Freud has engaged this aspect. Earrings for pierced ears are acceptable. Then why are nose rings or diamond studs—common in India, for example—problematic? What about belly button rings, studs in the eyebrow, barbells in the tongue, rings through the nipples, rings and rods through the penis, through the clitoris? What is within the range of "normal"? When is it perverse? Of course, we all have subjective responses. Objective reasoning is a little more difficult. Tattoo and piercing destabilize our ways of seeing, thinking, and analyzing. In Burke's scheme of things, both are part of a code of resistance. Burke's rhetoric of motives sheds light on the phenomena of tattoos and piercing. And even as his theory explains why the faddist, the follower of fashion, does as she or he does, it is the ever-expanding world of tattoo and piercing that tells us how much more urgent those motives are than anyone had suspected.

Summarizing Observations

Burke's analysis of identification and division within the symbolic purification process lies at the base of this discussion on tattoo and piercing. Burke begins with the identification we share—namely, that we are all "fallen"—and goes on to the complexities of division, those within the self, where one part says no to another part, and those among various people who, though agreed on certain aspects (tattoos, say), disagree on others (racist and violent lifestyle versus new-age spirituality, for example). The purification process itself takes two forms: making others victims (scapegoating) and making ourselves victims (mortification). Both are at work in tattooing and body piercing as symbolic actions.

Redemptive identification in either form manifests tension between consubstantiality and individualism and, thus, contains the seeds of division. To explore the many divisions among those tattooed, I chose to focus on display and concealment, what is hidden and why. Closely related to that discussion is the idea that tattoos are corporeal emblems that symbolize transformations in identity; the wearer displays them for others to behold as

tangible manifestations of having acquired a “purified” identity, with corresponding implications for division and identification. Display of identity is thus linked indelibly to the dynamic between revealing and concealing tattoos. The contrast between having oneself engraved with polite images (rosebuds and butterflies) or with erotically confrontational or politically inflammatory images (swastikas and hard-ons) serves as an obvious illustration of the implications of revealing and concealing in disclosing identity through display.

I also discussed how the terms “civilized” and “primitive,” a difference that the “civilized” invented, become tangled. The civilized world not only takes credit for discovering “primitive” iconography, but also rushes to emblazon these deliciously “other” images on their own pampered flesh. With globalization, body decoration becomes yet another kind of commodity that can be purchased to display the right aesthetic and the desired identity. Even so, the “civilized” largely remain blind to the mortification rituals that they themselves enact when acquiring these images, though they would be quick to see “ritual” in similar images when emblazoned on “primitive” bodies. As Burke would contend, both are symbolic acts of mortification, whatever else they might be said to be.

Finally, I considered body piercing in comparison with tattooing. The pierced, too, enact a redemptive drama through display and concealment of a corporeal emblem of transformation before potential beholders. But piercing exemplifies, to a greater extent than tattooing, literal as well as symbolic mortification.

There are at least two implications that follow from the analyses in this chapter. One follows from the presumption that our identities—while certainly not formed and reformed arbitrarily—are not permanently fixed or otherwise static; rather, they are dynamic and continue to develop within the ongoing drama of human life. The guilt-purification-redemption cycle is continuous and is not terminated by any single symbolic action. But tattoos, unlike most body piercings, are corporeal emblems of transformation that designate a new identity in a permanently fixed, tangible form. The possibility always remains open that identifications and divisions will shift and that those emblems of redemptive transformation could eventually become enduring, tangible symbols of a polluted identity in need of purification. Removal of the tattoo then becomes the painful act of symbolic—and literal—mortification through which the wearer again seeks purifying redemption.

The second implication is that a Burkean perspective on the symbolic acts of tattooing and piercing inescapably implicates both those who exhibit them and those who behold them within symbolic drama. Those of us who might react negatively to the exhibition are ourselves performing purifying symbolic acts, perhaps in the form of victimage or scapegoating. I am right thinking, clear thinking; she is not. And, of course, others might see the display as exemplary of a path to transformation of the self and, perhaps, pursue redemption through similar purifying acts of mortification manifested in the corporeal form of a tattoo or a piercing.

Throughout this inquiry I invited readers to join me in an us/them relationship with the tattooed and pierced. Any such division turns into a subject/object model. In this case, “we” do not participate in tattooing or piercing, but “they” do. The emphasis of this inquiry is to view “them” from “our” nonparticipatory perspective. Even as I acknowledge that we all are caught within the implications of perspective, I also insist that all of us—the tattooed and the pierced and the untattooed and the unpierced—are participants in symbolic dramas. Displays of tattoos or of piercings and responses to those displays are symbolic actions

laced with attitudes. If Burke is at all right—and I think that he is—those symbolic actions, however variable, implicate us all in the dramatic cycle of expiating guilt in pursuit of redemption through symbolic acts of mortification, victimage, or both.

Notes

This paper is dedicated to Larry Prelli, generous editor, scholar, and friend.

1. Susan Benson, "Inscriptions on the Self: Reflection on Tattooing and Piercing in Contemporary Euro-America," in *Written on the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History*, ed. Jane Caplan, 235 (London: Reaktion Books, 2000).
2. Mark C. Taylor, "Skinscapes," *Pierced Hearts and True Love: A Century of Drawings for Tattoos* (New York: The Drawing Center, 1998), 30.
3. *Ibid.*, 32. Taylor explains Loos's "emphasis on tattooing" immediately following the citation: ". . . because he [Loos] sees in the practice the origin of all forms of ornamentation associated with the primitivism that humanity is destined to overcome. The movement from the primitive to the modern is characterized by the gradual disappearance of decoration."
4. For a clear and incisive analysis of and commentary on Burke's theory of dramatism, see William H. Rueckert, *Kenneth Burke and the Drama of Human Relations*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982). For critical discussions of Burke's works, see Barbara A. Biesecker, *Addressing Postmodernity: Kenneth Burke, Rhetoric, and a Theory of Social Change* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997), and Robert Wess, *Kenneth Burke: Rhetoric, Subjectivity, Postmodernism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
5. And Burke's perspective for studying symbolic drama, his "dramatism," designates "those [terms] that begin in theories of *action* rather than in theories of *knowledge*." Kenneth Burke, "On Human Behavior Considered 'Dramatically,'" appendix to *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 274. Burke's model of redemption is detailed within the context of his dramatisitic vocabulary in this appendix, 274–94. Useful summary discussions of this model are found in Sonja K. Foss, Karen A. Foss, and Robert Trapp, *Contemporary Perspectives on Rhetoric* (Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland, 1985), 178–82; Bernard Brock, "Rhetorical Criticism: A Burkean Approach," in *Methods of Rhetorical Criticism: A Twentieth Century Perspective*, ed. Bernard L. Brock, Robert L. Scott, and James W. Chesebro, 3rd ed., 184–86 (Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 1989); and especially Rueckert, *Kenneth Burke and the Drama of Human Relations*, 128–52.
6. Burke, "Definition of Man," in *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 15.
7. Burke, "On Human Behavior," 282. Burke's discussion of Coleridge's use of the staircase as a theoretical plan illustrates this idea, 279–81.
8. Burke, "Definition of Man," 9–13.
9. Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), 4–5.
10. Kenneth Burke, "The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle,'" in *Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 202–3; also see his discussions in "On Human Behavior," 283–89, 292–94; and *Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 406–8. Burke also reflects on the scapegoat mechanism in poetics in *Philosophy of Literary Form*, 39–51. For a useful commentary, see C. Allen Carter, *Kenneth Burke and the Scapegoat Process* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996).
11. Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion*, 190. Burke makes a similar point in his discussion about how in poetics—as in life itself—"symbolizing of an old self is complemented by the emergence of a new self." See *Philosophy of Literary Form*, 39. Burke also discusses mortification in "On

Human Behavior," 289–90. An analysis and application of the mortification mechanism that has informed my position is Floyd D. Anderson and Kevin R. McClure, "Teddy Agonistes: Redemptive Identification in Edward M. Kennedy's 1980 Presidential Primary Campaign" (paper presented at Eastern Communication Association, May 1998).

12. Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion*, 190.

13. *Ibid.*, 190.

14. See, for examples, Mari Boor Tonn, Valerie A. Endress, and John Diamond, "Hunting and Heritage on Trial: A Dramatistic Debate over Tragedy, Tradition, and Territory," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 79 (1993): 165–81; Brian L. Ott and Eric Aoki, "The Politics of Public Tragedy: Media Framing of the Matthew Shepard Murder," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 5 (2002): 483–505; Barry Brummett, "Symbolic Form, Burkean Scapegoating, and Rhetorical Exigency in Alioto's Response to the 'Zebra' Murders," *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 44 (1980): 64–73; and Barry Brummett, "Burkean Scapegoating, Mortification and Transcendence in Presidential Campaign Rhetoric," *Central States Speech Journal* 32 (1981): 254–64.

15. For exceptions, see Jeanne Y. Fisher, "A Burkean Analysis of the Rhetorical Dimensions of a Multiple Murder and Suicide," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 60 (1974): 175–89; and Beth A. Messner and Jacquelyn J. Buckrop, "Restoring Order: Interpreting Suicide through a Burkean Lens," *Communication Quarterly* 48 (2000): 1–18. Also see Kara Shultz, "Every Implanted Child a Star (and Some Other Failures): Guilt and Shame in the Cochlear Implant Debates," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 86 (2000): 251–75.

16. Burke, "On Human Behavior," 289–90.

17. For a reading on the subject of inversion of the conventional law-abiding order, based on Foucault's antiscience project, see Michael Huspek and Lynn Comerford, "How Science Is Subverted: Penology and Prison Inmates' Resistance," *Communication Theory* 6 (1996): 335–60.

18. Burke, "On Human Behavior," 278–79.

19. *Ibid.*, 285.

20. *Ibid.*, 284.

21. Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 19–20; also see 3–6, 16–17.

22. *Ibid.*, 21.

23. *Ibid.*, 20.

24. *Ibid.*, 22.

25. *Ibid.*, 23.

26. *Ibid.*, 25.

27. *Time*, March 8, 1999, 28–30.

28. Southern Poverty Law Center, *Intelligence Report* (Fall 2000), 24ff.

29. Janna Malamud Smith, *Private Matters* (Boston: Wesley Addison Publishers, 1997).

30. Smith, from a telephone interview, August 18, 2002.

31. Susan Benson, "Inscriptions of the Self: Reflection on Tattooing and Piercing in Contemporary Euro-America," 237. Gell is quoted in Benson's essay. His book is a landmark study on tattoos: Alfred Gell, *Wrapping in Images: Tattooing in Polynesia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

32. Benson, "Inscriptions," 235.

33. *Ibid.*, 236.

34. Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, 27–28.

35. Matuschka, the artist whose self-portrait "Beauty out of Damage" (exposing her mastectomy) appeared on the cover of the *New York Times Magazine*, August 15, 1993, has since had a design of flowers and insects tattooed over her concave mastectomy scar. In her as-yet-unpublished

autobiography
way to deal wi
pain of tattoo:
8–9.

36. Taylor,

37. *Ibid.*, 3

38. *Ibid.*, 3

39. *Ibid.*, 3

40. Rueckl

autobiography, "Last Letter to Florence," she details her motivation on her particular choice of a way to deal with her surgery and her breast loss. She does not minimize the almost unbearable pain of tattooing over scar tissue. *Portsmouth Herald Sunday*, September 26, 2004, sec. E, cover and 8-9.

36. Taylor, "Skinscapes," 30.

37. *Ibid.*, 30.

38. *Ibid.*, 31.

39. *Ibid.*, 34.

40. Rueckert, *Kenneth Burke and the Drama of Human Relations*, 147.