

Stigmata and embodiment: tattoos and piercings as mediums of culture and self

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Introduction

From the last decade of the 20th century onwards, the changes in the 'code of body' or of 'body presentation' are increasingly observable in public. Previously 'stigmatised' tattoos and piercings have gained social acceptance and even endorsement, paving the way for reception in the society. From the pejorative, the concept is retrieved in its original sense of symbolic signs on the body, as by tattoos, also used for symbols of the divine, and of belonging.

Whereas in previous centuries, from Greek and Roman Antiquity onwards, the styles of dress changed, the codes regarding the body were quite unchanged: The body was untattooed and only sparingly pierced, in the earlobes, if at all. If so, then female. Over the recent decades, this code has drastically changed. Manifold piercings and tattoos have become prevalent, thus indicating a fundamental change in the codes governing the formation and presentation of the body in public- in the visible parts of the body, and in private, in the intimate.

This development is evidently of systematic interest in the perspective of cultural anthropology and history of culture. It is thus well worth to look at its roots.

The Heidelberg anthropologist, Hans Peter Duerr, was one of the first to note this phenomenon as significant. In a seminal book in the Cultural Revolution or the last quarter of the 20th century, in the Euro-American sphere – in *Traumzeit. Über Grenzen von Wildnis und Zivilisation*¹ (*Dream-time: on the boundaries of wilderness and civilisation*) - he described it, and traced some of its sources. The book itself both represented and described this cultural transformation. Duerr traced evidence of mediaeval body piercings – as in the erotic culture of the 14th century courts - and of tattoos, as by folk traditions of elder, pre-Christian-Roman cultures of Europe. These, he argued, came to the fore in dominant ('mainstream') culture from the 19th century on, by contact-with non-European cultures, and their body aesthetics, in the course of explorations and colonialism, which opened the space for extensive cultural contact. The extensive tourism, possible from the mid-20th century onwards, these codes of body ornamentation came to be adopted, together with other elements of culture, aesthetics, and spirituality, adopted first into the emerging 'counter-culture' and then, increasingly, into the 'mainstream' culture, which defines the general norms of aesthetics of a society.

The move from the 'fringes' into the centre as a systematic element

¹Duerr HP. *Traumzeit: Über die Grenzen zwischen Wildnis und Zivilisation*. Frankfurt: Syndikat; 1978.

in this era. It is mirrored in S. Freud's and C. G. Jung's interest in non-European cultures, as representing excluded, 'marginalised' or previous symbols of the 'soul'. Freud wrote about it in *Totem and Taboo*.² Jung likewise took extensive interest. Both shared the idea that the integration of these elements as representing something of a wider 'self' was wholesome, so that they should be integrated – a symbols of the Unconscious - into the conscious 'Ego'. This venture has a strong aspect of the discovery of libido' as a vital force, and the subsequent attention to sexuality in Freud's psychoanalysis, paving the way for the appreciative reassessment of sexuality in the 20th century, the 'sexual revolution'. Jung's wider concept of 'libido' integrated this with cultural symbolisms.³

A similar movement took place in the contemporary arts movement of Symbolism.⁴ In music, Stravinsky's ballet, *The Rites of Spring*⁵ enacted this integration of a Pagan past for the development of a new aesthetics.⁵ This also applies to the adoption of forms of (symbolic) art from Africa, in the quest or a new aesthetics in European art of the early 20th century.⁶

Duerr's title alludes to this relevance of the 'margins' – of non-Euro-American and of pre-Christian-Roman cultures – for this transformation. The phenomenon of changed norms of body aesthetics, is thus connected to this psychological figure of wholesome 'retrieval', which complements the figure of 'exploration' of 'new horizons'. The process of integration of such psychologically significant aesthetic elements of body ornamentation, has symbolic value, both in a general cultural and in an individual perspective.

The present paper thus aims to relate this cultural context of the emergence of tattoos and manifold body piercings into the accepted cultural codes and norms of body aesthetics, to individual aspects of their meaning as interiorization and exteriorization.

²Freud S. *Totem und Tabu: Einige Übereinstimmungen im Seelenleben der Wilden und der Neurotiker*. Vienna: Preface.

³Jung CG. *Wandlungen und Symbole der Libido*. Jahrbuch für psychoanalytische und psychopathologische Forschungen. 1912;4.

⁴Kleinhempel U. Rilke's translation of "The Slovo o Polku Igoryeva" ("The Song of Igor's Campaign") in the context of his spiritual and poetological development. *Aliter*. 2017;8:3–32.

⁵Hagedorn V. Ballett "Le Sacre du Printemps": Fieber, Sex und Zukunft. *Die Zeit* – Magazin. May 16, 2013.

⁶Junge P, Ivanov P, eds. *Kunst aus Afrikas: Plastik, Performance, Design*. Cologne: DuMont; 2005:56ff. Exhibition catalogue: Staatliches Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin.

The 'permeable self' and its body: introjection of symbolism and projection of the soul on the body

The concept of the 'Permeable Self' was coined by the mediaevist Barbara Newman.⁷ Her point of departure is described thus:

"Starting from the premise that the medieval self was more permeable than its modern counterpart, Newman explores the ways in which the self's porous boundaries admitted openness to penetration by divine and demonic spirits and even by other human beings".⁸

She applies it to the spiritual and affectionate culture of the middle Ages. She describes how the emotional and spiritual relations were also expressed bodily, by symbolic introjection of the beloved, human, spirits, and the divine.

The concept has been adopted in anthropological literature, such as by Diana Espirito Santo.⁹ She applies to the integration of spirits into the self, which can also be done by bodily means:

"Through the expression of these spirits (both innate and foreign) in, and through, bodies, things, and actions, they are integrated into the Selves of their mediums ("infolding") as they are simultaneously personified and differentiated from them ("outfolding")".¹⁰

This analogy may be indicated as background.

This idea might be applied to the discovery of the body as a 'wide field', as a canvas, and more so, like a membrane too, which is 'inscribed' symbolically, by tattoos, and which is 'pierced' with jewellery, thus making the surface of the body 'porous', to bear the ornaments placed in it at significant places, taking effect both inwards and outwards. This points to the aspect that 'body art' is not merely decorative, but symbolically, mediating between inside and outside. The degree and sources of symbolism may vary. It has effects on the wearer, and the viewer. Other than clothing or cosmetics, it is more 'embodied'.

The prevalence and evaluation of body art, of piercings and tattoos

Tattoos and piercings are quite common in the Anglo-Saxon cultural sphere – more so than in Germany, or in other European countries. According to a study by the renowned *Pew Research Centre*, the proportion of tattooed people in the USA is 36% of the age group 18 – 25, 40% of the 26 – 40 year olds and 10% of those aged 41 – 64. At the time of investigation.¹¹ This shows that a significant minority of the population adopts tattoos and piercings, with a generational difference, as a phenomenon mostly of younger people, with a shift to the middle generations – as observable in the meantime, where it is observable with mid-life persons too.

The phenomenon is spread differently from country to country, with some homogenisation observable. The figures for Germany are significantly lower, but they are increasing. In 2009, the *Gesellschaft*

für Konsumforschung (GfK) conducted a representative survey on the subject of tattooing and piercing throughout Germany, on behalf of the Ruhr University Bochum, in conjunction with tattoo and piercing associations (RUB, 2014). The evaluation revealed:

"The number of people with tattoos (piercings) ... is 9 percent (piercing - without ear piercings - about 7%). In the age group of 25 to 34-year-olds, the highest proportion of people with tattoos (22%) or piercings (52% including ear piercings) is located. In the study, no connection between tattoos and school education can be proven."¹²

The study (RUB 2014) examined, among other things, the distribution of the phenomenon according to age, gender, education and social status. An earlier study by the University of Leipzig showed similar values. In these studies, a marked rise was observed in a short period of time: "Between 2003 and 2009, a significant increase in tattoos among women was observed, almost doubling in the group of 14-64-year-olds. Among 14-24-year-olds, 22.9% of women and 14% of men were tattooed. Piercings were worn by 35.1% of women and 7.8% of men".¹³ This makes it clear that tattoos and piercings are no longer a phenomenon of marginalized groups. The fact that tattoos and piercings that go beyond the previously common ear piercings are examined together indicates that they are perceived as two forms of expression of the same phenomenon. The phenomenon is understood as providing an array of symbolic means of defining and displaying identity in the aesthetic field.¹⁴ This may apply more to tattoos, with their permanence, than to piercings, being exchangeable.

Sources of styles

The different types of tattoos and piercings are connected to their regions and realms of origin. As to tattoos, these were taboo since Greek and Roman Antiquity. A tattoo as regarded as a form of stigmatisation, reserved for slaves. They were considered unworthy of a free man. In Mosaic religion, body marks and scarification, were rejected: "You shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor print any marks upon you."¹⁵ Such body marks apparently had religious connotations too, perceived as incompatible. The only exemption as to body marks is circumcision. In the New Testament, the oriental custom of religious tattoos is mentioned by St. Paul, for himself: "From henceforth no man trouble me: for I bear on my body the marks [stigmata] of the Lord Jesus".¹⁶ This is understood to refer to the religious tattoos, which indicate a permanent adherence to a deity. Tattoos of crosses are widespread in oriental Christianity, as in Ethiopia, in Lebanon, or in India, to this day. Thus, Christianity does not forbid tattoos as such. The ideal of the human being as created "in the image and likeness of God"¹⁷ may contribute to the reticence regarding body modifications.

Theologically, the absolute invisibility of God, the Creator, as being beyond any represent ability – and thus not to be depicted in any way – represents the 'apophatic' aspect of God, which also applies to the human, created in the image of God, and to his likeness. The symbolic 'limitation' of the body by religious tattoos appears to be in tension with this ideal. However, according to Christian theology, the

⁷Newman B. *The Permeable Self: Five Medieval Relationships*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press; 2021.

⁸University of Pennsylvania Press, ed. *The Middle Age Series – The Permeable Self*. 2025

⁹Espirito Santo D. Turning outside in: Infolded selves in Cuban Creole Espiritismo. *Ethos*. 2015;43(3):267–285

¹⁰Espirito Santo D. Infolded in Cuban Creole Espiritismo. *Ethos*. 2015;43(3):256–275

¹¹Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, ed. *A Portrait of "Generation Next"*. January 9, 2007

¹²Ruhr Universität Bochum, ed. *RUB-Studie zu Tätowierungen und Piercings*. May 2014

¹³Bräher E. *Verbreitung von Tattoo/Piercing/Körperhaarentfernung*. Pressemitteilung der Universität Leipzig. 4f.

¹⁴Camphausen R. *Return of the Tribal: A Celebration of Body Adornment—Piercing, Tattooing, Scarification, Body Adornment*. Rochester, VT: *Park Street Press*; 1997:2.

¹⁵The Bible. *Leviticus 19:28*.

¹⁶The Bible. *Galatians 6:17*.

¹⁷The Bible. *Genesis 1:26*.

one, triune God, has 'confined' himself in the second 'person' of the Holy Trinity, Christ the Son. Thus, images of Christ are permitted and made, as in icons. The debate about these issues was concluded after the 'iconoclastic struggle', at the Second Nicene Council, in 787, and confirmed in 843. This provided a firm basis for the use of religious images, and icons, and for their veneration as means of representing aspects of the divine, of the Holy Trinity, of events and saints of Christianity. On this basis, religious tattoos, as means of private piety, are accepted, as the custom of Christian tattoos, shows.

The pagan connotations of pre-Christian religious cultures may have added to their rejection in the Christian Middle Ages. This was confirmed in late Antiquity, by Emperor Constantine in the 5th century.¹⁸

Other cultures, like the Chinese, or the Japanese, also reject tattoos. The well-known Irezumi tattoos of Japan are confined, traditionally, to subcultures of gangsters and erotic entertainment. Here, it became a topic of public interest, as in the first novel by the eminent J. Tanizaki.¹⁹ In northern and Eastern Europe of Pagan times, an Arab merchant of the 11 century, Ibn Fadlan, reports about heavily tattooed Viking tradesmen – a clear indication of this as common custom.

In Western Europe, tattoos received new interest by the voyage of James Cook to Polynesia, in the 18th century. This interacted with local traditions, preserved in rural popular subcultures. Thus, it became fashionable. Similarly, persons with intensive cultural contact with non-European cultures, practicing tattooing, contributed to introducing them to the codes of European and American societies.

In modern times, tattoos received their aesthetic codes partly from these sources. Thus, Japanese or Scandinavian pagan tattoos were adopted as distinct styles. Other styles are Amerindian, e.g. to wear them connects the bearer to these symbolic and cultural realms. Apart from that, there are merely decorative tattoos, without specific cultural or religious symbolic meanings.

The following styles can be noted. Forms in our cultures are:

- 1) Memorial tattoos, which commemorate relatives or friends who have often died too early.
- 2) Name tattoos of family members or partners
- 3) Tattoos that remind of special life events, whether to make them present or as a sign of their healing and overcoming. The wearer connects himself permanently with them. They become signs to be read.
- 4) Tattoos that connect the wearer to foreign cultures and spiritual worlds, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, or shamanic cultures
- 5) Tattoos of the tradition connection to archaic cultures, be it the Germanic Viking culture, the Celts or the Scythians. It was noticed that the 5300-year-old 'Ötzi' is tattooed. The ornaments of Scythian ice mummies of the Pazyryk culture (5th century BC) are used as tattoo templates and symbolize cultural reconnection.
- 6) Religious tattoos with texts from Holy Scriptures, or symbols.

The ornamental scarification, practiced by some African societies, has hardly been adopted. Several dimensions of meaning may be identified:

Five dimensions characterize tattoos and body modifications (piercing, decorative scars, etc.) in non-Western cultures:

- 1) Social status by age group, life and hierarchical level, gender, clan and tribe
- 2) A religious or spiritual initiation (also symbolized by secret signs)
- 3) The erotic, sometimes associated with initiations
- 4) The aesthetic, often individually designed
- 5) A psychological one, to provide information about the inner state of the wearer in the forms of symbolic communication of culture.²⁰
- 6) An 'initiatory' meaning, as symbolising a life transition.
- 7) A spiritual one of re-connection with 'origins'

For the latter dimension two archaeological findings are significant and were widely discussed in public. The finding of the Bronze Age 'ice mummy' in Tyrolia,²¹ provided the eldest evidence of tattooing.²² Here, the motif of 'return to the origins', identified by the eminent historian of religion, Mircea Eliade, may be observed.²³ Similarly, the finding of royal Scythian ice mummies in the Altai Mountains, preserved with elaborate tattoos,²⁴ provided of tattoos as enactment of a symbolic return to sources or origins.²⁵ These findings also serve to legitimise tattoos as ancient and venerable cultural practice,²⁶ thus de-stigmatising them. The adoption of specific non-European styles of tattoos connects the bearer symbolically with these cultures, 'inscribing' them into the skin of the tattooed, and vice versa relating the person permanently to these. Such cultural contact zones have been the American West,²⁷ Polynesia, Japan, etc. Interestingly, the 'export' of the new Euro-American codes and forms of body-art raise re-appreciation of indigenous forms of body-art, such as the traditional ear tunnels of South Africa, or the nose piercing, and multiple ear-rim piercings in India. They are re-evaluated as permissible in the context of present 'global' culture.

About the effects of tattoos: With the tattoo, a new element appears. While the body has so far been sacredly defined as inviolable, and may only bear traces of lifestyle and constitution, it is now permanently designated with signs and symbols that are in principle unchangeable. The reception of non-European forms of shaping the body is still ongoing and has produced independent developments in this country. Their effects on the field of style codes of fashion, public, private and intimate body design, self-image, bodily communication and self-experience are only rudimentarily recognizable.

²⁰Kleinhempel UR. Der bezeichnete Leib: Zur Wandlung der Körper-Ästhetik in Tattoos und Piercings. In: Kick HA, ed. Leiblichkeit und Seele im Spannungsfeld von Weltbezug und Transzendenz. Münster: Lit Verlag; 2021:115–136.

²¹Vollmann S. *Bekannte Funde der Archäologie*. München: GRIN Verlag; 2012

²²Pabst MA, Letofsky-Papst I, Bock E, et al. The tattoos of the Tyrolean Iceman: a light microscopical, ultrastructural and element analytical study. *J Archaeol Sci*. 2009;36(10):2335–2341.

²³Eliade M. *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 1969.

²⁴Reese MR. The stunning ancient tattoos of the Pazyryk nomads. *Ancient Origins: Reconstructing the Story of Humanity's Past*. October 29, 2014.

²⁵Eliade M. *Das Mysterium der Wiedergeburt: Versuch über einige Initiationsstypen*. Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag; 1988:100ff.1953.

²⁶Tattoo History >> Eastern Europe (Russia) & Western Asia >> Pazyryk Mummies. *The Tattoo Museum*. 2013.

²⁷Mifflin M. *The Blue Tattoo: The Life of Olive Oatman*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press; 2009.

¹⁸Kleinhempel UR. Von Gottes- und Menschenbildern. Eulensisch: *Limburger Magazin für Religion und Bildung*. 2017;(9):35–42.

¹⁹Tanizaki J. *The Tattooer*. 1910.

Piercing the surface: piercings – significance and history

Alongside with tattoos, but in a parallel development, piercing jewellery evolved to new codes. Up to the mid-20th century these were confined to the simple earlobe piercings for women. On portraits from the Renaissance to the early 19th century men are also occasionally depicted as wearing earrings. In the late Middle Ages the poet Oskar von Wolkenstein explained his earrings as symbols of ‘bondage’ to the queen of Aragon, who gave them to him as gesture of erotic favour.²⁸

This custom revived, also by inspiration from non-European cultures, as the styles show. The multiple ear piercings, which have become widespread,²⁹ also took their models for India, in particular. Here, the different sites for piercings are correlated with energetic points.³⁰ In India, piercings are often performed at life transitions, with specific symbolism and physiological and psychological effects intended.³¹ Similar charts of energetic points also exist for the nose, especially the septum.

In the mid-20th century even simple ear-piercings were rather discouraged, to be replaced by ‘clips’. Evidently, the rule represented the ideal of an unharmed, integral body. The Punk movement of the late 1970’s protested against the ideal of integrity, by perforating the skin in various places. The aesthetic impulses of this transgression later came to be integrated in high fashion. Thus, the editor of the leading fashion magazine, *Vogue*, A. Wintour, had herself portrayed as somewhat ‘punkish’ with a septum ring and purple dyed hair.³² The ironic gesture indicated that body piercings, as ‘liminal’ elements, had become integrated into the canon of high fashion, and thus endorsed. The magazine *Vogue* had its share in paving the way for the style codes of various forms of piercings as acceptable fashion, from the late 20th century onwards.³³

With the late 20th century body piercings of all kinds turn up, step by step, in significant, and movements, noticed in public. Fashion designers and pop-stars took the lead. Here, erotic piercings of Middle Eastern origin are noted as having been adopted from the 20th century onwards.³⁴ The historian of culture, R. Camphausen declared:

“The last years have brought an explosion of interest in ... all types of body decoration. [...] I would like to show the multidimensional background of these traditions in tribal societies of the past and present. As more and more individuals fully reclaim control over their minds and bodies ... we see them revive not only such ancient arts as tattooing and piercing, but also may other forms of self-expression...”³⁵

The movement combines different roots: In the counter-culture, travels to India for spiritual reasons became fashionable. Many brought along Indian dress, and style of jewellery. Thus, the nose piercing of the nostrils, became a marker of the ‘passage to India’, whether literally or symbolically. The southern Indian styles, of a combination of nostril and septum piercings took hold more gradually.

²⁸Oswald von Wolkenstein. *Es fuegt sich*, III. (vor 1445).

²⁹Ferrier M. The new piercing fashion rules. *The Guardian*. October 23, 2014.

³⁰Impuria Jewellery, ed. Ear piercings as acupuncture therapy. March 13, 2013.

³¹Eshwar Bhakti. Why do we pierce ears? *Puja Yagna Blog*. April 22, 2023.

³²The Cut, ed. See New York’s punk Anna Wintour alternate cover. *New York Magazine*. May 6, 2013.

³³Cochrane L. *Vogue’s nose ring nudges body piercing into the mainstream*. *The Guardian*. February 7, 2014.

³⁴Morrison C. *The Piercing Temple*. Australia; 1998.

³⁵Camphausen R. *Return of the Tribal: A Celebration of Body Adornment—Piercing, Tattooing, Scarification, Body Adornment*. Rochester, VT: *Park Street Press*; 1997:2.

Then, other sources, apart from India, became sources of inspiration. Here, especially the Americas provided models. The warrior cultures of the North American pacific coast had septum piercings. Likewise, Meso-American, cultures. To follow these models meant to relate to the indigenous cultures also aesthetically, by adopting their codes of body ornamentation. The adoption of these forms of piercings could signify a distancing from solely European aesthetics of the body. It was a form of ‘going native’ that went along or parallel to the adoption of Amerindian spirituality and rites.

The extended ears, for ear tunnels, have their models in mediaeval India, as depicted in the frescoes of the Ajanta caves, but also from northern India and South-East Asia. They were also practiced by the Maya aristocracy. Here, a cosmological symbolism is connected to them. Tunnels and caves represent transitions to the underworld or the upper world, at the ‘axis mundi’. Thus, a person inserts this tiered cosmos symbolically, by wearing ear tunnels, as connecting to these realms.³⁶

As to intimate piercings, the origins are not fully clarified. Some models were adopted from South East Asia, with genital piercings for both sexes. There are, however, also European origins. Thus, nipple piercings were discussed in the late 19th century, as documented for Great Britain, Poland, France and the United States.³⁷ For both sexes, but predominantly female.³⁸ They are also depicted in Belle Epoque art, from Austria-Hungary.

Female genital piercings are a central motif in Anne Cécile Desclos sadomasochistic novel, *L’histoire d’Ô*,³⁹ published under pseudonym,⁴⁰ in 1954.⁴¹ (It was soon forbidden in many countries as too transgressive.) It points to an erotic subculture, whose roots, in literary tradition, have been traced to contemporary authors and back to the 17th century. The intense reception as a work of art, indicates however, both the ‘liminal’ character of this novel of erotic exploration to the ‘limits, and the role of body piercing in it, which is performed in the mode of ritual acts of self-abandonment. The role and significance of body piercings in eroticism is depicted paradigmatically here.

Another aspect of piercings and of tattoos is, that in many cultures they mark life traditions, and sometimes initiations. They indicate them, thus as sign of status in life. They can be collective markers, or individual ones. (The wedding rings, meant to be worn permanently, are such a symbolic element.) They can also symbolize initiation into a specific cultural or religious realm. This aspect has been received in Euro-American cultures at present, for both. The notion of the body differs from the traditional one here: it is the idea that the body ought to be ‘cultured’ by symbolic transformations, like tattoos, body incisions, scarification, and also piercings, with the appropriate jewellery. With this understanding of the body, that it needs to be transformed and ‘cultured’, the body is ‘designated’ and inscribed into the realms of culture and religion which the tattoos and piercings symbolise.

Tattoos and piercings as indicators of a deep transformation of aesthetic codes of the body in European and American cultures

³⁶Henderson LR. Earflare set. Maya. 3rd–9th century. *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*. 2002–2024.

³⁷Simoes LA. Époque victorienne: Des piercings aux tétons en 1890. January 5, 2022.

³⁸Orne J. *The English Mechanic and World of Science*. 1899;49(1254):118.

³⁹Réage P. *Histoire d’O*. Sceaux: Éditions J.J. Pauvert; 1954.

⁴⁰de St. Jorre J. The unmasking of O. *The New Yorker*. August 1, 1994:42–50.

⁴¹Deforges R. *Pauline Réage: Die "O" hat mir erzählt. Hintergründe eines Bestsellers*. Charon; 2000.

The change in style that has taken place in the last 3 - 4 decades with regard to the aesthetics of the skin and the body is epochal. What is new is that the skin is 'semioticised' to an extent previously unknown in our culture. So far, the body, also the trained and clothed body was taken in its integral shape, as a 'closed form', and as 'bearer' of clothing, cosmetics and jewellery. Its surface however was left intact. The new element is, that the body is 'inscribed' and transformed. The somatization of the body is seen by cultural scholars in the context of an increasing 'mediatisation' and 'aestheticization' of culture. As early as 1944, Ernst Cassirer stated:

"Physical reality seems to recede to the extent that man's symbolic activity gains space."⁴²

This is related to the easy technical reproducibility of images in the 20th century, which has turned modern culture into a world of images. With the emergence of the Internet, the world of images has multiplied. According to a widespread view, the aesthetically designed images take precedence over the immediately present world. This goes hand in hand with a comprehensive 'media aestheticization of everyday life'.⁴³ The popularization of tattoos, piercings and other forms of aesthetic body modification is explained in this context.⁴⁴ They expand the repertoire of possibilities for aesthetic self-design and presentation. As such, they have been picked up in recent years by television stations, which have contributed significantly to their establishment in the mainstream of the cult.

However, these motives are unlikely to be sufficient to explain the profound change in body aesthetics in the late 20th century. Earlier epochs of European cultures have already cultivated aesthetically sophisticated self-presentation, as it confronts us in the form-rich and artistic clothing of leading classes in the late middle Ages, in the Renaissance and in the Baroque, depicted in paintings from those epochs. What is new compared to these epochs is that the body is not only clothed and (peripherally) adorned, but is itself aesthetically permanently and radically modified. These forms have been adopted from non-European cultures. They represent a break with aesthetic conventions of body design that have endured for two millennia, through very different stylistic epochs. A changed understanding of what it means to be 'human' seems to be the basis for the reception of these non-European stylistic forms of aesthetic body design. The fact that these have undergone an independent further development in European and American cultures in recent decades, promoted by a comprehensive media aestheticization, is likely to be only a consequence, but not a cause, of the change.⁴⁵

Conclusion

The new codes of body ornamentation by tattoos and piercings reveal a profound change in the concept of the body. The relation of

⁴²Cassirer E. *Versuch über den Menschen: Einführung in die Philosophie der Kultur*. Hamburg: Meiner Verlag; 1996:50. Originally published in English, London, 1944.

⁴³Bidlo O. *Medienästhetik und Alltagswelt: Studie zur Mediatisierung*. Essen: Oldip Verlag; 2019:11.

⁴⁴Ibidem, p. 74

⁴⁵Kleinhempel, Ullrich R., „Der bezeichnete Leib: Zur Wandlung der Körper-Ästhetik in Tattoos und Piercings“, in: Kick, Hermes Andreas (Hg.), *Leiblichkeit und Seele im Spannungsfeld von Weltbezug und Transzendenz*, Münster, 2021: Lit Verlag, pp. 115–136

the body, outwards and inwards is concerned. The transformed and semioticised body becomes a medium of expression of inner reality, and of 'incorporation' of outer, symbolic (and religious) realms, and of the connection of the bearer with them. It is 'embodiment' in two ways. This may be called the 'existentialist' aspect of tattoos and piercings. Here complex combinations of meaning and dimensions are possible and may be observed.

The symbolization of desire, the bodily inscription of spiritual, cultural and aesthetic references, the initiation of transformation and transformation, as well as the symbolic visualization of the self through the body, and finally of the self-image and its communication in the public and private spheres are connected to this.

It can be assumed that the deep cultural effects of this reception will continue to have an effect for a long time to come. The spiritual and cultural effects of these new bodily symbolic means of expression remain to be observed.

These recent change in body aesthetics in modern times are therefore not a superficial phenomenon, but an aesthetic expression of an epochal change. They indicate a changed perception of the relation between corporality, the psyche, and cultural realms with their symbols.⁴⁶

The encounter and reception of non-European aesthetics and 'bodily practices' have inspired and contributed to this development. Thus, it indicates a deep process in this regard too. Analogous changes, early in the 20th century in the visual arts and music, evolving out of these encounters, support it. From the point of view of the history of religion, the reception of these body modifications, and the values and ideas of the body associated with them, may also indicate transformations in this field too. The renewed focus on the relation between 'interiority' and 'exteriority' and culture, indicates that this phenomenon merits further studies of aspects of this field. Christianity, which has formed Euro-American culture so decisively, has at its doctrinal core the theology and anthropology of 'embodiment' or 'incarnation'. Its traditions of 'iconic' marks and of 'stigmatized bodies' provide a basis for conceptualisation also of these changing codes, to which it may have contributed itself.

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None.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

⁴⁶Kleinhempel UR. Der bezeichnete Leib: Zur Wandlung der Körper-Ästhetik in Tattoos und Piercings. In: Kick HA, ed. *Leiblichkeit und Seele im Spannungsfeld von Weltbezug und Transzendenz*. Münster: Lit Verlag; 2021:115–136.