

### **Semiotics and Tattooing**

1. Archaeological information suggests that tattooing – the insertion of ink into the layers of human skin, was around in ancient civilisations such as Egypt and evidence of tattooing in the Stone Age has been found
2. Differences were physically marked out through scarification and tattooing
3. Such marks signified key moments in an individual's life with regard to rites of passage

### **Fashion**

1. Although the religious and rites of passage have diminished and it has moved into the realm of fashion
2. Tattoos are highly symbolic and still communicate meanings of social, cultural and individual significance

### **Symbolic**

1. Tattoos often tell stories and signify key moments and developments of a life
2. For others to read – or for themselves
3. Tattoos speak to the world semiotically

### **Semiotics**

1. Barthes (1993) most famous example of mythology is that of the cover of the French magazine *Paris Match*
2. Where a black soldier in French uniform is saluting (to a flag)
3. Myth operates in an ideological way and suggests that the French colonial empire displays no discriminatory practices and highlights the enthusiasm and support the colonised have for their oppressors

### **Saussure**

1. Saussure – talks about how signs are drawn from language within society
2. He noted that all signs form a concept – signified and signifier
3. The signifier is a cultural construct subject to change – words change –
4. Words and concepts get their meanings from other words and concepts
5. Any sign is what all the others are not – night is the binary opposition to day

6. And also the reader – Umberto Eco argues, is important

### **tattooing**

#### **Scars that speak**

1. Tattooing has been traced back to religious, magical and status communicating practices
2. Maori warrior Moko tattoos were designed to signify meanings such as prowess in battle and to convey social status within tribal groups
3. In Europe, the Picts – an ancient tribal group in the British Isles adorned themselves with animal tattoos to inspire fear for the invading Romans

#### **Europe**

1. Tattooing continued in Europe in the Anglo-Saxon period before the Church banned it but returned during the Crusades (with crucifixes)

#### **Cook**

1. Cook and his crew reached Tahiti on their second voyage 1772-1775 – Cook introduced the Tahitian word ta-tu meaning to strike or mark (it had been called Pricking in the west before this time)
2. Many of Cook's officers and sailors were tattooed and brought their designs back to England

#### **Disrepute**

1. The early Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909) associated criminals as being physically different from law abiding individuals and noted that tattoos identified membership of criminal groups
2. He included tattooing as a sign of inherent criminality
3. There have been distinctive eras in the development of tattoos
4. The early Circus/Carnival Era (1880s-1920s) popularised tattooing as a source of public entertainment and as a form of social deviance
5. Sailors bearing numerous tattoos returned from their travels – they sought work in carnivals that promoted them as wild men

#### **Tattoo parlours**

1. The tattoo parlours were also located in the less salubrious areas and represented a social club for individuals on the margins of society.

### **Rebel Era**

1. Developed post WWII
2. Individuals elected to wear tattoos as deliberate badges of defiance against social conventions to advertise their collective discontent with society
3. Tattooing became associated with danger and transgression
4. Youth cultures – such as motorcycle gangs in the 50s and 60s used tattoos as a code of rebellion

### **Tattooing around the globe**

#### **Japan**

1. The initial period of Japanese tattooing spanned from the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE to the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD. It was revived in the 13<sup>th</sup> century as a method of permanently marking criminals with tattooed symbols
2. Subsequent developments in Japanese tattooing art would consistently be the subject of state censure
3. It became an underground practice – and in modern times associated with crime groups

#### **Russia**

1. A significant body of work has been devoted to the status and function of tattooing in the Russian prison system during the Soviet Era and beyond the fall of the communist regime
2. Russian prisoner bearing tattoos mapped out a complex system of folklore
3. Tattoo designs were secret – a code that would not be read by outsiders

#### **American prisons**

1. tattooing was a system of communicative encryptions to denote gang affiliation within prisons or one's feeling of capture and confinement

### **Symbolic contexts**

#### **Chronicle**

1. So these symbols represent a voice that speaks of personal history, thoughts feelings, memories and regrets - a chronicle of life

### **new Age Era**

1. Began in the 70s
2. Tattoos came to be recognised as statements of self
3. Move away from association with disreputable and criminal classes
4. And a means of self-expression
5. Designs were tailored for the person to be tattooed –More personalised and often unique

### **Motivations for tattoos**

1. Range of motivations by those who have tattoos
2. Group affiliation, commemoration of a significant event
3. From the 80s a more positive response to tattooing

### **Tattoos as storytelling signs**

1. Many decide on designs that symbolise personal issues or interests, hobbies, fandom
2. Wearing a tattoo is no longer significant and the traditional social censure of the practice as unfeminine has diminished
3. magazines consist of editorials concerning developments and trends in global tattooing culture, artist features, events, and model profiles and other designs
4. which advertise consumption of popular culture

### **Symbolic associations**

1. E.g. religious iconography are commonplace (angles, Hindu images, crucifixes (, as well as cinematic horror icons (Dracula, Hannibal Lector), and cultural and historical figures (Clint Eastwood, Marilyn Monroe).
2. Images are drawn from popular comics, television and films – transformers, Captain Jack Sparrow, Tank Girl etc.
3. There are also celebrity tattoo artists Ami James, Chris Garver, Hannah Aitchison, Corey Miller, Louis Malloy, Kat von D (Katherine Von Drachenberg)

## Media

### TV and tattoos

1. This has been facilitated by the popularity of series of tattoo-centred documentary/reality television shows from 2005 onwards
2. *Miami Ink*, *LA Ink*, *London Ink*, *NY Ink*
3. Focus is on the stories of clients and their designs
4. Often communicating something about themselves to the wider world =-
5. E.g. Mermaids in tribute to a father's sailor past
6. Childhood memories and periods of change Or coping with bereavement

## Context

### Semiotics tattoos and the problem of meaning

1. The popularity of tattooing across class and gender from 80s onwards has been interpreted as a means by which individuals secure a sense of stable identity in a fluid postmodern world
2. Something stable and lasting

#### Derrida

1. Derrida established the concept of deconstruction - a complex method of close reading that demonstrated that texts cannot sustain definitive meanings
2. Tattoos on the other hand, are worn to be timeless and stable
3. But are subject to social, cultural m individual polysemic and deconstructive readings
4. Which may not be read in the way the wearer intended