



SOCIETYNOW

**TATTOOS AND  
POPULAR CULTURE**

Cultural Representations  
in Ink

Lee Barron



# TATTOOS AND POPULAR CULTURE

# SocietyNow

SocietyNow: short, informed books, explaining why our world is the way it is, now.

The SocietyNow series provides readers with a definitive snapshot of the events, phenomena and issues that are defining our 21st century world. Written leading experts in their fields, and publishing as each subject is being contemplated across the globe, titles in the series offer a thoughtful, concise and rapid response to the major political and economic events and social and cultural trends of our time.

SocietyNow makes the best of academic expertise accessible to a wider audience, to help readers untangle the complexities of each topic and make sense of our world the way it is, now.

Poverty in Britain: Causes, Consequences and Myths  
*Tracy Shildrick*

The Trump Phenomenon: How the Politics of Populism Won in 2016  
*Peter Kivisto*

Becoming Digital: Towards a Post-Internet Society  
*Vincent Mosco*

Understanding Brexit: Why Britain Voted to Leave the European Union  
*Graham Taylor*

Selfies: Why We Love (and Hate) Them  
*Katrin Tiidenberg*

Internet Celebrity: Understanding Fame Online  
*Crystal Abidin*

Corbynism: A Critical Approach

*Matt Bolton*

The Smart City in a Digital World

*Vincent Mosco*

Kardashian Kulture: How Celebrities Changed Life in the 21st  
Century

*Ellis Cashmore*

Reality Television: The TV Phenomenon that Changed the World

*Ruth A. Deller*

Digital Detox: The Politics of Disconnecting

*Trine Syvertsen*

The Olympic Games: A Critical Approach

*Helen Jefferson Lenskyj*

This page intentionally left blank

# TATTOOS AND POPULAR CULTURE

Cultural Representations  
in Ink

BY

**LEE BARRON**

*Northumbria University, UK*



emerald  
**PUBLISHING**

United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India  
Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited  
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2020

Copyright © 2020 Emerald Publishing Limited

**Reprints and permissions service**

Contact: [permissions@emeraldinsight.com](mailto:permissions@emeraldinsight.com)

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted in any form or by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without either the prior written permission of the publisher or a licence permitting restricted copying issued in the UK by The Copyright Licensing Agency and in the USA by The Copyright Clearance Center. Any opinions expressed in the chapters are those of the authors. Whilst Emerald makes every effort to ensure the quality and accuracy of its content, Emerald makes no representation implied or otherwise, as to the chapters' suitability and application and disclaims any warranties, express or implied, to their use.

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83909-218-3 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-83909-215-2 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-83909-217-6 (Epub)



**ISOQAR**

REGISTERED

Certificate Number 1985  
ISO 14001

ISOQAR certified  
Management System,  
awarded to Emerald  
for adherence to  
Environmental  
standard  
ISO 14001:2004.



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

# CONTENTS

Introduction	1
1. Visible Ink: From Subculture to Mainstream Culture	9
2. Tattoos in Film	39
3. Tattooing and Reality TV	69
4. Social Media and Digital Tattoo Communities	101
5. Tattoos and Popular Personalities: Inked Celebrities	131
Conclusion	159
<i>Bibliography</i>	<i>163</i>

This page intentionally left blank

# INTRODUCTION

As the 21st century progresses, the practice of tattooing, the bodily process that ‘creates a large dermal wound embedded with particles of pigment and liquid ink’ (Farley, Van Hoover, & Rademeyer, 2019, p. 160), is arguably at its most culturally visible. Yet, the history of tattooing is one of the change and changing perceptions, not only in terms of the technology of bodily inscription (the evolution from hand-poked techniques to the use of the tattoo machine) but also in terms of why people acquired tattoos and who traditionally wore them. While tattooing is an ancient art, in recent history, they were almost exclusively associated with working class culture and signs of rebellion, subcultural groups and even deviance, from the 1960s (in the Western world, at least), attitudes began to progressively change. From this period, in terms of the nature of tattooing, the quality and artistic scope of designs and who began to acquire tattoos, the practice has changed, and perhaps radically, to the extent that tattoos are now arguably more culturally visible than they have ever been. In consequence, it is argued that tattoos are now a firm part of the mainstream social and cultural world, although perceptions of them still vary. As E. M. Dadlez states, some ‘tattoos are intended to shock or dismay – to reinforce one’s outlier or signal a failure of respectability’ (2015, p. 741, while, in Maurice Patterson’s view, tattoo ‘styles have increasingly become a matter of individual choice and custom design’

(Patterson, 2018, p. 585). This latter view captures the essence and modern inheritance of what has been dubbed the ‘Tattoo Renaissance’, a process by which the class and gender boundaries of tattooing increasingly blurred, and tattooing became not simply body decoration, but a means by which to communicate an aspect of self and personal identity. As Alice Snape argues in *Tattoo Street Style*, in contemporary culture, it ‘is easy to be lured in by the mystery and the beauty of tattoo art, and almost impossible to escape it in this day and age’ (2018, p. 6).

At one level, this perception can apply to the increased number of people evident in everyday life who wear tattoos. However, another way in which tattoos can be deemed to be ‘impossible to escape’ is the degree to which they are visible in popular cultural forms. For instance, tattoos have become an increasingly regular aspect of consumer culture with regard to advertising and fashion imagery and marketing (Møller, Kjeldgaard, & Bengtsson, 2013), but also within an array of popular cultural representations and forms. To again quote Alice Snape on the contemporary status and cultural presence of tattoos:

*Tattooing is now more popular than ever before. I still find it fascinating that a once-ancient tradition and rite of passage now branches out into almost every area of the mainstream. Tattoo art has made its way into high fashion magazines, the cosmetic field, magazines and newspapers. A–Z list celebrities are rocking tattoos like never before, and tattoos are everywhere on reality TV...Now with online apps such as Pinterest, Instagram and Tattoodo, members of the public have easy access to almost every artist’s updated portfolio.*

(2018, pp. 7–8)

*Tattoos and Popular Culture* examines these popular cultural and media representations of tattooing and will not only explore

the ways in which they reflect but also contribute to the visibility of tattooing within contemporary culture. Accordingly, superhero films feature tattooed characters, such as Aquaman and Harley Quinn; television genres such as reality TV now show numerous tattoo-themed shows; social media platforms enable people to view the work of artists across the world and upload images of their own designs and tattoos now routinely appear in advertising and brand promotion imagery, while celebrities wearing tattoos are now commonplace. With reference to contemporary celebrity culture, media figures like Post Malone are literally changing the face of tattooing. In this fashion, *Tattoos and Popular Culture* looks at representations and the communication of tattoos and tattoo cultures in relation to film, television, social media and celebrity culture and how they reflect, inform and influence contemporary tattoo culture and practices. While the history of tattooing stresses the development from the subcultural to the mainstream, the differing examples of media forms discussed will stress that there is an overlap between these differing stages. In this regard, the theme of subcultures constitutes a persistent thread throughout the book, as does the idea of tattoos constituting an alternative communal grouping. Hence, while tattooing has manifestly expanded beyond niche subcultures, the theme of tattoos representing otherness, rebellion and dissimilarity persists, especially within popular culture.

Chapter 1 provides a foundational overview of the key elements within the history of tattooing, from its roots in ancient communicative and therapeutic practices to the tattoo as a cultural sign of status and as a rite of passage. A key issue covered in this chapter is the communicative nature of early tattooing practices, extending into the religious use of tattoos. Focussing on significant moments in tattooing history, the chapter examines the depiction of tattoos as signs of rebelliousness and otherness and as part of subcultural bodily styles. As such, the classic concept of subculture is an important part of

the chapter, which is then compared with the later development of tattooing in terms of tattoos acting as modes of self-expression and semiotic markers of identity. However, the chapter critically considers the ways in which the increased adoption of tattooing from the 1970s has produced a ‘tattoo community’, due to the commitment made by the tattooed to be marked for life. Finally, the chapter considers the dynamics of the generations driving the mainstreaming of tattooing, Millennials and Generation Z, which are not only at the forefront of using tattoos as biographical symbols but also which often look to popular culture for tattoo inspirations.

Chapter 2 explores representations of tattoos in film and looks at the ways in which films present diverse approaches to tattooing that draw from differing aspects of tattoo culture and history. The chapter therefore discusses films that associate tattoos with otherness, rebellion, deviance and subcultural expressions. In this regard, tattoos form key visual aspects of characters in crime and action films, denoting alternative lifestyles and bodily aesthetics, and also stress distinctive sub-cultural identifies, from the tattooed Goth-styling of Lisbeth Salander in *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* to the central role that tattoos play in *Romper Stomper*, *American History X* and *Skin*. However, the chapter examines the ways in which tattoos communicate self and represent semiotic codes, themes central to *Memento* and *Eastern Promises*, and, with reference to the horror films *Tattoo*, *The Tattooist*, and *Perfect Skin*, explore the status of tattoos as an art form. Finally, the chapter looks at the ways in which tattoos are present within mainstream film, from Disney’s *Moana* to Marvel and DC superhero films such as *Guardians of the Galaxy*, *Venom*, *Black Panther*, *Aquaman*, *Suicide Squad* and *Harley Quinn: Birds of Prey*, films whose characters also inspire numerous fan tattoos.

Chapter 3 focuses on the relationship between tattoos and television, but with the primary focus on reality TV. The chapter

discusses the development and key properties of the multifaceted genre and examines how the first major tattoo-themed reality TV shows, *Miami Ink*, not only documented the professional and personal lives of a number of tattoo artists but also played a role in enhancing the normalization of both tattooing and tattooists, meaning that perceptions of it as a ‘deviant’ practice were transformed, or at least mitigated, and revealing the nature of the ‘tattooing subculture’ to wider audiences. Furthermore, this form of reality TV enhancing the perception of tattoos serving as symbols of self-expression and personal history was significant as a substantial aspect of the narrative is devoted to client ‘tattoo stories’. The chapter examines the growth of tattoo-themed reality TV shows (*LA Ink*, *London Ink*, *NY Ink*, and *Black Ink Crew*), and also how as the genre of reality TV has progressively evolved into differing generic forms, so too have tattoo-themed shows. Here, the chapter examines more populist reality TV expressions that differ markedly from the ‘storytelling’ early variants. For example, competition-style reality TV formats have found tattoo-themed variants in the form of *Ink Master*, a series that pits a number of professional artists living together in a studio against each other to survive a series of challenges to produce an ultimate winner. Alternatively, there are a range of shows that depict tattooing as a source of entertainment and comedy, such as *Tattoo Fixers*, which deliberately showcase poor-quality tattoos, and often obscene or offensive designs, and which also provide comically exaggerated recreations of the original tattooing experience and peer reactions to the various examples of ‘nightmare ink’, in which tattoos serve as a form of media spectacle and as a form of entertainment. This idea is developed with regard to MTV’s *Just Tattoo of Us*, in which participants are given a tattoo that has been designed by friends, partners or family members, and which they do not see until the final reveal – with comedic and emotional reactions as the designs are invariably in poor taste.

However, the chapter concludes with discussions of documentary styles of reality TV, such as *Needles and Pins*, which takes a global perspective to tattoo culture, with the onus of examining the more subcultural expressions of the practice.

Chapter 4 explores tattoos in the context of social media platforms and centrally returns to the theme of a tattoo community discussed in Chapter 1 and considers Manuel Castells' argument that the early 21st century of the Internet established 'virtual communities' that constituted new digital forms of sociability. Since Castells' early commentary on this technological social behaviour, this debate has extended to the impact of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. The chapter therefore examines the impact of social media on tattoo culture and how it has developed from the traditional tattoo convention and print magazines to how tattoo magazines such as *Inked* magazine have successfully remediatized with the interactive *inkedmag.com* site. The chapter also considers the ways in which, via the app-based platform Instagram, artists' portfolios are digitally visible and client relations no longer geographically fixed. Furthermore, Instagram has had demonstrable influence on contemporary social actors' attitudes towards tattooing and the environment of professional tattoo spaces, rendering them as more accessible for those who may have previously found them intimidating. More substantively, the chapter discusses social media-based tattoo spaces in which tattoo aficionados 'digitally congregate' to post images of their tattoos, react to the professional work of artists or comment on tattooing trends. These sites are interactive and enable users to post and comment, but they also constitute tattoo-themed 'art worlds' and digital tattoo heritage spaces. The chapter stresses the various ways in which social media is a key media expression for contemporary tattoo culture, which brings together the professional industry, commentary, visual user-created content

and digital virtual dialogue forums with which to engage with celebrity tattoo artists, such as Kat Von D.

Chapter 5 is concerned with the visibility, influence and status of celebrities with tattoos. In the context of the ways in which celebrities are perceived as inspirational figures in terms of bodily styles and fashion trends, such perceptions extend to tattooing. While notable celebrities have sported tattoos in the past, such as Janis Joplin, the chapter looks at the ways in which the number of celebrities adorned with tattoos has markedly become more visible in 21st century popular culture. While subcultural expressions of tattooing have been, and continue to be, present with musical personalities from genres such as heavy metal and hip hop, tattooed celebrities from mainstream popular culture are now commonplace. Hence, from David Beckham, Johnny Depp, Angelina Jolie and Tom Hardy to Adam Levine, Cardi B and Ruby Rose, images of tattooed celebrities are now commonplace in film, TV, music videos and promotional imagery, fashion advertising. The chapter stresses that Millennial and Gen Z performers have added tattoos to their fashion repertoire, with pop performers such as Rihanna, Justin Bieber, Ed Sheeran, Halsey, Rita Ora, Drake, Dua Lipa, the K-Pop artists Jay Park, Ariana Grande, Halsey and Post Malone not simply having tattoos, but in many instances being heavily tattooed. While celebrities stress the symbolic and identity-affirming meanings of their tattoos within media discourses, in subcultural terms, mainstream pop performers now reflect the heavily tattooed bodily aesthetic associated with musical genres and cultures such as punk, heavy metal or hip hop. Furthermore, the popularization of hand, neck and facial tattoos, previously considered a taboo and stigmatizing bodily placement, is being driven by pop performers such as Post Malone, thus contributing to the normalizing, through extensive media representations, of traditionally socially censured bodily placements.

This page intentionally left blank