The Pierced and Tattooed Body: 
The Branded Skin-ego of Post-Oedipalization

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Post-ing the Landscape of Post-Oedipalization

In the postmodern world of designer capitalism where the belief and trust in the symbolic order has begun to ravel, we are presented with a confusing landscape of bodies whose modernist signifiers are no longer able to contain the new emergent forms. The question of “youth” has been stretched and twisted in a paradoxical way: on the one hand children are getting “older.” They seem to mature more quickly, asked to grow up before their time because of family breakdown; to learn about safe sex because of AIDS, and with the emergence of the new media such as the internet, they are baldly exposed to obscene sides of life that they would usually be confronted with later. Pre-teens are given the right to sue their families; many are latchkey children who look after their younger brothers and sisters as their parents come home late from work. On the other hand, the border between adolescence and adulthood has been twisted in the other direction. Mothers and fathers are in competition with their sons and daughter in trying to remain “forever young.” Young men and women seem never to grow-up, as there are not enough adequate jobs in the market place that would enable them to settle down. Many young people drift from job to job, or have several menial jobs together. Re-bounding, coming back home again because it is difficult to sustain an apartment away from parents while working or going to an institute of higher education, is not unusual. The postmodern family no longer raises their children: between school and the newer media such as video games, computer, the Internet, DVD movies, less and less contact time is spent with parents. What has emerged in this twisted and paradoxical space of “youth” is a post-Oedipalization. Signifiers such as “bois” and “boyz” have emerged to mark an arbitrary difference, as well as to chart the emergence of post-adolescent experience that seems to stretch itself to the late twenties to early thirties as a time of unsettled responsibility. “Girlie,” “girlz,” “gurlz,” “grrrls” present us with a similar set of newly emerged
signifiers that play with the twists in youth culture for pre- and post adolescent women.

We have given this brief picture so that we might grasp why piercing and tattooing have emerged within this particular post-oedipal dynamic. The de-centering of the symbolic order has produced a generalized hysteria and obsessive behavior regarding identity. By this we mean it is more and more difficult to know where one belongs in the symbolic order. Being overwhelmed with choice in a so-called liberal society, leaves the young person with no choice, a perplexity that says everything is open, yet not really. Growing up in a modernist context under fairly stable family conditions meant that the role models for middle class youth were rather limited: mother, father, doctor, lawyer. For underclasses it was not even a question of choice. Options were restricted to becoming, for instance, a priest or nun to have a better life. Since, roughly, the '60s this all began to change as the first wave of the feminist movement began, women began to enter universities, television opened up new role model possibilities, and it took longer and longer to become prepared for the job market. These events have only intensified with the emergence of postfeminism, the internet, computerization, and the continued difficulties to find a meaningful job in the symbolic order without the sacrifice of an incubation period to become trained, or to attend a college, university or technical institute.

Consumer of designer capitalism has introduced a new demand; that is, to “Enjoy!” The superego of postmodern industrialization pushes consumption through the hyped senses of sound and vision. It is the aesthetization of the signifier as both a heightened picture and sound which Baudrillard has surrealistically described much to the chagrin of his critics. The music video has emerged as the new postmodern hieroglyph, which operates on digitalized visual effects and synthesized sounds which are proving to be nonsense for an older generation that has not grown up with the new electronic media. They are unable to comprehend its logic. To anchor the hysteria of identity, designer capitalism has concentrated its marketing efforts on brand loyalty. Brand should be understood here on its many levels of meaning so that we may grasp it as a form of tattooing and piercing.

First, to brand something is to leave an identifiable trace of the signifier on the object. Animals are branded, as were slaves, criminals, and concentration camp prisoners. This more brutal and demeaning use of the sign is clearly a subjugation to the Other. One becomes
objectified as a piece of property. No matter how "free" one is (e.g.,
certain slaves could have the "free run" of the master's house), the
brand sign becomes transcendental in its psychic hold of being someone
else's property. The brand anchors identity. It is a master signifier to
which the wearer has an affective relationship. But, how one interprets
such branding has everything to do with the larger socio-historical
context. It is not difficult, for example, to believe that a slave was proud
to be owned by a particular "generous" owner! As obscene as this
sounds to us today, if the concept of being "free" for a particular class,
sect or gender is non-existent then the enslavement seems normal. This
goes for patriarchal relationships where women are "owned" by men, or
the social bond in capitalism. Robert Owen's New Lanark factory, as
"free" as it was for its workers, could still be considered a form of
enslavement in Marxist terms. The workers were still exploited for
profit no matter how sanitary the conditions were compared to other
factory owners in eighteenth century England.

Second, there is a marked difference of branding before the
ideological establishment of modernity as the "democratic" rule of the
bourgeoisie compared to its use during that rule. A number of stages can
be identified of piercing and tattooing before the advent of modernism.
Tribal societies pierce, cut, and tattoo as a sign of belonging to a
transcendental totem animal signifier. Identification in the pagan
context means belonging to an intricate order of clan moieties.
Boundaries are well defined. Identity is worn on the skin. Under
patriarchal religions, the Jewish cut of circumcision was a
transcendental sign that divides monotheism from paganism. What was
an externalized branded sign of identity now becomes codified
negatively. It takes on an "ugly" aesthetic. Christianity does away with
the branded cut entirely. The Jewish transcendental sign has now been
internalized. There is no need of any display on the body as the Judeo-
Christian ideology has "stabilized" the unconscious psyche. The
transcendental signifier is God. With modernity, as Foucault so ably
showed, the secularization of God takes place through the disciplinary
procedures of the body. The body emerges unmarked, unmutilated and
clean. A classical Greek aesthetic of beauty of the skin-ego shapes the
psyche of the bourgeoisie. An external brand remains a sign of disgust.

Third, advertising media of reproduction arose at the turn of the
century during the "electric age," marking a historical moment when
universal suffrage "democratically" threatened to overturn the
established party conservatism with socialist programs as nations under monopoly capitalism began to industrialize. The marketing strategies of reproduction, paradigmatically developed by advertising as print media, began to influence public opinion and consumerism. International capitalism made possible the amassing of new goods in the major cities of the world: London, Paris, and Berlin. Walter Benjamin’s apt descriptions of the way the arcades and department stores in these cities lured the flâneur and the flâneuse into gazing at the goods displayed behind the shopping vitrines are well known. It was a stage of capitalist consumption that has been hyper-aestheticized by the global designer capitalism of the electronic age.

Fourth, the body has begun to mutilate again today into its neo-tribal forms as the internalization of the authority of modernism begins to decenter. The faith in institutions, especially the Law, as parodied by such television shows as *Ally McBeal*, for instance, has not only meant a generalized hysteronization of identity, it has produced a hyper-narcissism of the ego. Young people, especially, are affected the most in their search for peer groups—as new centers of authority—to whom they can believe in and anchor their identity. The other response by young people has been an obsessive one. To escape facing the ambiguities and uncertainties of the “New World Order,” they have begun to escape into the obsessive virtual world of video games where they need not deal with the political realities of “real life.” It is much more exciting to live virtually in cyberspace. The proliferation of the music industry (stars and bands) and the entertainment industry (video games, films) offers to both hysterics and obsessives a way to both “anchor” and “lose” their identities. We find ourselves in a socio-historical moment where, just as at the turn of the 20th century, forces of conservatism are hard at work to restore their flaccid Phallus; this is to say, their transcendental impotency through new forms of branding.

Fifth, the skin-ego is Anzieu’s term to grasp the way the body mediates into inner and outer life through the porous, membranous and “warped” surface of the body. We would like to incorporate Anzieu’s interesting concept of skin-ego into a Lacanian account of piercing and tattooing to help grasp why the body has become interesting again as a sight/site/cite of struggle and ownership. Lacan presents us with three complexly intertwined psychic registers which help to explain the dynamic between the unconscious and conscious. The Real refers to unconscious body registrations that are both beyond the pre-conscious
imagination and the consciousness of language. We have designated this as "site"; the site of the inner body as a topological site. The Imaginary psychic register is the space of fantasy. It is the skin-ego envisioned as a (mis)recognized alter ego that we have of ourselves. It is our imago as an ideal ego. We have designated this as "sight"; the sight of the outer body, of how we think we like to be perceived. Finally, Lacan’s last psychic register is the Symbolic Order, or big Other. This refers to the conscious dimension of language and it includes the structuring of the subject by the discourses of the social order. It includes both the law and the transgression to that law. Hence, an Ego-ideal is presupposed. This Ego-ideal is the superego in Freudian terms, for there is an expectation of how one should behave. In other words, the Law has a demand about it. “Thou shalt do this!” and not that. We have designated this as “cite.” For Lacan it is the signifier which is primary. A signifier is, therefore, informed by site/sight. It has an affective loading (either positive or negative, active/passive, love/hate etc.) in the unconscious and an imaginary gestalt visualized in a scene of fantasy. Fantasy is therefore the outer alter-ego registered on the skin through the inner bodily Real (on one side) and the big Other (or outer-outer body) on the other side. The skin-ego as alter ego of the psychic Imaginary mediates the Real and the big Other or symbolic order.

Sixth, this is the kernel of the theory we will be applying. All experience is registered in the unconscious Real, through the body. The memory of such an experience is then selected on two levels: by a pre-conscious Imaginary—the scene of fantasy which is then framed by conscious signifiers. Tattoos and piercing have begun to appear on the body as a skin-ego, as a conversation that a hysterical hyper-narcissist is having with him- or herself in relation to the failed Law today. In other words, we are saying that the reflective mirror of our egos has become questionable. This mirror is being "split" by a "split-screen" of a schizophrenic personality that is in conversation with itself, trying to anchor itself to a small Other, since the big Other is dissolving. The name brand of designer capitalism searches to addict the consumer to its product through the body to establish a small Other. Addiction is aimed at the site of the body. It has to become dependent on it. It has to want to come back to it again and again for reconfirmation. It has to be a willing slave to the brand, to do it consciously, even when you are torn not to consume it. Addiction is what structures the pain and pleasure of designer consumerism. In Lacanian terms this is called jouissance:
painful pleasure. Such an addiction is governed by the structure of bulimia. Attempting to get “off” the stuff of addiction leads to an anorexia: starvation by young girls, over-training by boys where “Nothing” is consumed and no muscle is gained. On the contrary, the body starves as there is no signifier it wishes to accept. The ideal ego that they strive for can’t be attained. Hence, the alter-ego as skin-ego begins to wither. No longer can the mirror sustain its illusion. The subject disappears into the Real, the vanishing point of the mirror. The anorexic becomes consumed by the Real. Going the other way, the addict “over-does” the signifier; that is, s/he overdoses on it. S/he becomes obese and fat, unable to stop the consumption because a bigger “hit” is required to sustain the enjoyment. The alter-ego is out of control. The mirror keeps getting more and more distorted. The bulimic solution to designer capitalism is binge and then vomit. Addiction leads to a “postemotionalism.” Aesthetization turns into its opposite—anesthetization. We binge on the product, activity, drug of choice, and then we vomit it out or attempt to stop—we become anaesthetized.

Seventh, designer capitalism of branded addiction works on the principle of the drive, or Trieb in Freud’s terms. It directly stimulates the body’s cavities—its drives (oral, anal, genital) to stimulate an abundance of jouissance—libidinal pleasure. Its superego demands us to “Enjoy!”, to transgress the Law since the Law itself is failing. We have only to think of the corruption of the CEO’s of Enron to recognize that this is the tip of a much larger iceberg. Without “protection” from such a command one easily becomes addicted—to porn, drugs, food, clothes, extreme sports, and so on. How is such a protection to be had. There have been two major responses—neither of which has anything to do with tattooing and piercing, which is a response to this dilemma all on its own. A return to tradition religions or the search for New Age religions has been one response. The Law is reinstated or made up afresh in a personal religion. The latter is a Madonna-like response where you are into designer religious shopping: a little Buddhism, mixed in with a little Jewish kabbala, topped off with Indian mysticism. The second is that of the cynic as aptly described by Peter Sloterdijk. One plays the system because one knows there is no hope to change its corruption. So, why not just make the best out of it and manipulate its rules? Tattooing and piercing is yet another response: to establish one’s own alter-ego as a form of self-protection. A self-sacrifice of one’s own skin to either belong to a group (postmodern tribe) through the branded
tattoo or pierce so that the hysteria is grounded; or to differentiate oneself from the crowd by becoming an "ugly" body. Abjection, rather than being outside the hegemonic system, becomes simply another form of segregation. This alter-ego is established through a new way to "feel" in postmodernity—through pain. This pain is the site of the Real, so that pleasure comes from establishing a new skin-ego by *consciously* selecting the brand for themselves, "stealing back" the sign, so to speak. In MTV terms, you can become a "Jackass," hooked on your own pain—the direct opposite of the consumer demand to "Enjoy!" Pierces and tattoos begin to "split" the mirror of the ego. They become "events" written on the body consciously, thus marking the birth of a schizophrenic self. Music videos are saturated with young people "talking to themselves," attempting to re-make themselves, searching for protection in an ambiguous unstable postmodern world.

Eighth, the end goal of desire is more and more difficult to define. The "instant" gratification through the drive-addiction is what is continually being demanded by the Superego. Desire always has an impossible time delay about it. Its structure is metonymic. One has to wait and work for its product. There have to be obstacles in the way to overcome and reach the goal. The law has to forbid it to make it attractive and interesting, worth trespassing for. Time is precisely what is done away with in postmodernity. The enjoyment of just the processes is enough. When this happens, most everything becomes reduced to gratification and entertainment. The idea of work that produces a product becomes perverted. All products can be replaced by a newer and better updated model, hence history with the product is not a factor. It is meant to be used up and then discarded—like serial marriages. Our relation to the product is changeable, but not so with the tattoo, and less so with the pierce. The history stays on the body. We live with the permanency of the protective shell that is being constructed. It is a way to anchor oneself as a container that otherwise might be lost in space, or more graphically, lost in the hall of mirrors which the obsessional finds in the on-line computer games s/he plays, moving from one environment to another—endlessly if they so want. We have come full circle to where we began with the question of post-Oedipalization, and now proceed to describe how the skin-ego is altered to establish yet another skin of protection; as an externalization of the ego itself.
The Doubling of the Ego: The Making of the Schizoid Self

An incision is a cut made by an instrument that marks the skin. It opens up the body’s inside from its outside, drawing blood as the skin’s surface swells and becomes raw. Such a scoring by a knife or a stylus exposes us to the site of the Real, the psychic realm of the unconscious which Lacan claimed to be “beyond” language yet intimately dwelling within it. The Real is precisely where the signifier fails; where the Symbolic Order of language no longer holds. The incision produces a momentary trauma, registering it as a bodily memory which forces a slippage of signs. This cascade of nerve endings begins to change and modify the body’s “holographic” skin-ego.

Lacan inverted Saussure’s algorithm for the linguistic sign with:

$ S \quad \text{Signifier}$

$s \quad \text{signified}$

thereby showing the primacy of the signifier over the signified. Here the “bar,” as the line that separates the word from its imaged-meaning, designates the impossibility of the signifier ever guarantying a correspondent or non-ambiguous meaning. An abyss separates them. This abyss, one can imagine, is straddled, or jumped over by the constant back and forth exchange between the body’s inside and its outside as meaning is mediated through signifiers. As long as that mediation is stable, there is no trauma as such. These body processes happen at sub-conscious levels. But this “barred” line as a “cut” can “split” the signifier and its signified apart. The abyss is exposed. Non-sense is experienced like when an accident occurs or the person finds himself faced in an environment that is totally confusing, in a “foreign” country, for instance. In tattooing and piercing this “bar” as an incision into the skin-ego is consciously allowed to happen. The cosmetic surgeon’s scalpel or the piercer’s needle force the body’s established fantasmatic skin-ego to unravel and come apart. The body’s ideal ego begins to slip, twist and contort. In this sense acupuncture is a “mild” form of piercing where the body’s nerve routes and electrical flows are redistributed to relieve pain as the morphogenic image (Sheldrake) of the body’s memory is re-mapped. Here pain is intentionally summoned to re-member the body; to re-organize its distributive imago. Selectivity on the body, what image is to be tattooed, or what pierce will be chosen.
becomes very important—a ritual process which has lost meaning in postmodernity. By using the flesh as a medium, piercing, cosmetic surgery and tattooing psychically re-map and re-member the body differently, with sexually different bodies requiring different inscriptive tools to etch their different surfaces. Such extreme skin games are an attempt to "answer" the hysterical question of identity in a postmodern world. The tattoo can be the "cut" of belonging to a gang, a cause, a musical group, a Nation, and so on. These tattoos of belonging to the small Other (or ONE), not only anchors them but carries a magical protection as well. In each different case the isomorphism of the inside and the outside of the body image — cathected with libidinal intensity so as to hold the body's Imaginary and Symbolic psychic together — is opened up, torn asunder, and anamorphically skewed to form another screen-image as a new alter ego. While cosmetic surgery attempts to live up to designer capitalism's projection of the Ego-ideal, especially for women who strive to reach its "impossible" dimensions, the junkie piercer and tattooist are engaged in trying to ruin this Ego-ideal by becoming an "ugly" body within it. Not to draw its gaze, but to avert it. It is a transgressive stance. How successful they are at this ruination remains an open question since the "freak" is becoming a marketable commodity as well. For them, the body begins its semiological slide into another imaginary when the "bar" of signification which holds the signifier to the signified begins to be incised by the etching tools like the tattoo stylus, the hook, and the spike. Their painful jouissance, however, is not unlike the jouissance experienced by the beauty operation that reorganizes the ideal ego as well. The performance professor-historian-artist, Orlan, whose anti-beauty operations require months of recovery, is paradigmatic of a hysteric who is transforming herself into another woman complete with a new name who is deliberately "ugly."

The pierced and welted skin now becomes a palimpsest for "reminding" the entire body of its erotic libidinal governance; i.e., its jouissance of the drives which are pre-Oedipal, pre-linguistic, and prior to desire and the fall into language. Through the drive, the piercer/tattooist tries to "trick" the Real by having the body's drive circle around a "new" partial object (designated by Lacan as objet a) left as a tattoo or a pierce on the body. By so doing, the piercer/tattooist tries to capture and bring back into itself a little "bit" of the jouissance the subject had to give up by symbolically yielding to the disciplinary
actions of the big Other (through the processes of familiarization, socialization, enculturation, and so on). The metal ring or spike, and the tattoo, becomes a self-reflexive reminder of this attempt to re-write the body by tapping into its unconscious Real that has already been shaped by the cultural environment (big Other). This obsessive behavior (to keep on getting more tattoos, to have more pierces) is a way to avoid being swallowed up into the symbolic order. It is an attempt to stave off such a fall into being symbolically named by that order. It is common for tattooers and piercers to claim that opening one’s body up to the tattoo or piercing needle is a way of gaining control of the boundaries of the self—reclaiming one’s body from medical, scientific, and legal experts, i.e., “civilization,” in an act of deliberative, creative, and non-utilitarian (self)penetration as a means of sealing the body as a form of psychic protective armor. To feel in control of one’s body is to stave off the passage of aphanisis (the fall into desire and the signifier of the Other to become more “civilized, so to speak). The more common pierces—the ear pierce, tongue pierce, lip pierce, eyebrow pierce, nose pierce, and navel pierce—bodily mark the traces of the lost psychic objects of the dominant senses as the child enters language (the Symbolic Order). With the navel pierce, the trace of the umbilical cord is remembered; with the ear pierce, the fullness of the Mother’s voice as Other is recalled; the mouth pierce registers the breast that once belonged to it—perhaps the most primal of all lost objects—and the eyebrow pierce recalls the gaze of the mother when the child imagined that it was whole; finally, the nose pierce recalls the bodily smell of the self and Other as one.

There is a basic constitutive discord between the drive and the biological body. The drives disrupt the instinctual rhythms of the body, and it is for that reason that Freud referred to a death drive. When partial drives come all together we are at the point of death. Freud’s death drive stands for the destruction of the symbolic universe; for the replacement of metaphor, reproduction, and pleasure with those of metonymy, displacement, non-reproduction and pain. Body modification trades on this difference. It attempts to establish its protective skin-ego by mediating the death drive by the signifiers it brands on the body and the new w(holes) it creates. Piercing, tattooing, branding, as well as cutting, have emerged from their secretive hiding places on the body (where they weren’t meant for public display) to now becoming the visible signs of a response to what is perceived as an
increasing penetration of the symbolic order by corporations (company logos), government, self-help therapies, medicine, and science. This invasion of the private space by the public space has forced the retreat to take place at the sight of the alter-ego as a psychic survival for some.

The Masochism of Skin Play: Performing the Self

As Leo Bersani points out in *The Freudian Body* (55-67), the introduction of large quantities of excitation into the psychic economy has a "shattering effect" upon the coherence of a quiescently cathected ego. The pathology of masochism, for him, is sexuality *tout court* for it disrupts the libidinal and psychic constancy which has been canalized (i.e., encouraged to follow certain established routes) through familiarization, socialization, and enculturation. Hence, when sexuality assumes a perverse masochistic form, i.e., the subversion of the binary opposition of pleasure and pain as pleasure-in-pain, it can dislodge the sex/gender presupposed by a unified biological body, as argued by Judith Butler among others. It should not surprise us, therefore, that transsexual and transgendered bodies who attempt to escape heteronormativity through tattooing, piercing and the surgeon’s scalpel masochistically suffer in their attempt to transform themselves.

Masochism, as Deleuze argued, works insistently to negate paternal power and privilege in the sense that paternal power and the law are repudiated, i.e., disavowed. Its acts—with their displays of suffering, pain, discomfort, disgrace and humiliation—are intimately linked to the death drive, as are its spectacularity (exhibitionism) and suspense, given that Lacan’s description of the mirror stage underpins all subjectivity. But these performative acts are also creating a split in the ego that is being directly addressed by the performance piece. Such performative acts, following Silverman’s provocative analysis of “male subjectivity at the margins,” may be characterized as “feminine,” eliciting a heteropathic (Scheler), exteriorizing, or “ex-centric” identification with the Other (as spectator). Witnessing is an important aspect of body modification.

All this is dramatically illustrated by a genre of performance art referred to as “hardship art” or “ordeal art” (like Orlan, Bob Flanagan) where the performer’s body calls witness to the non-reciprocity of pain and the singularity of an individual’s death. Spectators are called on to participate in that “death” which is, from the outset, an “impossible”
undertaking (see Phelan, 152). The unbinding effects of the death drive appear to occupy a space between this "feminine" surrender of the self and a "masculine" response which is ideologically aligned with mastery and control. With the high performance art of body piercing and tattooing, and the repetitive cosmetic surgery by some women, jouissance is sustained by the repetition of the drives which try to annul lack through continuous satisfactions by psychically recovering the impossible "lost objects" (objet a). Hence the neologism "hyper-narcissism," or better still, "hyper-eroticism," seems to be an accurate description of the self which has been split into two (a hyper-Ego), given that there is an attempted "return" to libidinous Being. In such acts there is a refusal of desire if desire is read as lack in its Hegelian and Lacanian formulations. In such acts the death drive prevails and the performer faces subjective destitution. Paradoxically, horror and dread which such acts engender intensify the orgasmic body. De-sexualization and sexualization encounter each other in this "psychic black hole," as in the sexual techniques of strangulation and suffocation which are said to increase the felt orgasm of both partners. "Eroticism," as Bataille once said, "is asentning to life up to the point of death" (11). By prolonging the consummation of orgasm and ejaculation associated with "le petit mort," the mysticism associated with such ancient spiritual practices of coitus such as kundalini is recalled. This is the experience of "pleasurable torment" as Lingis (55) and Grosz (195) reiterate, where erotic craving is prolonged, extended and intensified to a physiological explosion. Ejaculation and orgasm occur at the precise moment that the suspense becomes unbearable, each partner surrendering him/herself to the possibility of death, as in the final sado-masochistic scene of Pedro Almadovar’s Matador where the bull fighter and his lover, a woman of comparable machismo, agree to mutually "kill" one another during their last moments of coitus when they both reach orgasmic climax.

Genital piercing of the inner labia, nipples, fourchette, clit hood and the clit itself, and driving spikes through the penis, or wearing penile rings, paradoxically opens up Freud’s entropic understanding of the death drive which was grounded in the phylogenetic reproduction of the species. The pleasure-pain of having sexual intercourse with pierced genitals might be interpreted as an attempt for the unconscious to screen the loss of experience in coming to the end of a moment of bliss in sexual intercourse. All the stress is placed on fore-pleasure. In the theorizing of Bersani and Dutoit homosexual emancipatory re-reading
of Freud the relationship between the fore-pleasures of the erotogenic zones that are strongly associated with femininity and perversion, and end pleasures of orgasmic discharge as the ejaculatory climax associated with masculinity, cancel each other out virtually. Sexuality becomes the dialectic of seeking the end of pleasure through discharge and then repeating the tension in order to increase it. Erotic craving is prolonged, extended and intensified.

All such hyper-narcissism avoids the impossibly of filling the void in the Other, that is escaping the symbolic order by turning pain into a source of pleasure, a jouissance felt as a oneness that maintains itself against a myriad of foes. The pierced body, wearing its metallic armor of spikes, rings, studs, hooks, stands as a testament to both a mastery of the body and its “losses.” It is a “stupid” body in the sense that there is no “subject” in the drive since this game of being and becoming goes on without language. It is a sadomasochistic pain/pleasure dialogue with the self in the split mirror, at the level of aesthetic bodily play—conducted with erogenous bits and glances between ourselves and others.

The question remains to what extent piercing and tattooing, as forms of self-protection and obsessive behavior that escape the fall into the authority of the waning symbolic order, are in any way politically charged and ethical in their statement? Does the creation of an “ugly” aesthetic ultimately fall into a romantic form of resistance which then slowly becomes mainstream, a passing fad? Moral masochism implies an endless postponement of the moment where suffering yields to reward, and victory to defeat; suspense works to prioritize pain over pleasure, and so further undermines the ego as an experience of pleasure in pain. Does such anti-consumerist behavior, if it can be put in this way, make a difference to social change? Or, has the abject become just another marketable brand? These are difficult questions. In a broad sense, it may be argued that such acts are ethical in their attempt to reconnect the sensuality of the body in a postmodern world where the body’s objectification is continually mapped and marked by classificatory systems of institutional identification along racial, ethnic, sexual/gendered, scientific, educational, governmental, and managerial trajectories. Yet, the jury is still out as to what extent these are “ethical acts in the Real;” that is, to what extent they are a ground swell to the failing authority of Modernist ideals. The future will tell as this generation struggles to find a way to make a difference.
Bibliography


