

Body Modification as Ideology

Introduction:

Does getting a tattoo or piercing constitute an ideology? It would not, perhaps, if an individual modified his or her body in total isolation from society. However, when people modify their bodies by tattooing, piercing, or scarring, they do so with the knowledge of—or in the indirect presence of—a large and rather loose network of people who are also modified, as well as, within the larger context of a non-modified—at least self consciously so—dominant culture. When such a network, however loose, exists, it is a social phenomenon that merits notice.

This presentation will look at how this phenomenon has been addressed by individuals within the modded (i.e., modified) community. The explanations and justifications cited by members of this community to define, explain, defend, or laud their practices can be considered ideologies. An ideology is a worldview, a component of an individual or a group identity, a way of defining in-group and out-group, and a way of dealing with crises that confront matters of identity. Yet, an ideology also has the following components: it is articulated, conflictual, subjective, and public. In what follows, my intention is to explore how people with post-modified bodies¹ strategically use their modifications in discourse; and to investigate how modification ideologies function. My intention is not to define a single and coherent ideology that can be applied to every modified person in the world, rather I will explore how some individuals within

¹ For a thorough discussion of the post-modified body see Matthew C. Lodder's web page to download a copy of his master's thesis "*The Post-Modified Body: Invasive Corporeal Transformation and its Effects on Subjective Identity*": <http://iam.bmezine.com/?volatile>. In addition to the coining of the helpful phrase "post-modified body," Lodder diligently and insightfully explores modification on its own terms as a personal choice, rather than as an indication of social malaise or personal pathology. This allows for an interesting analysis of the self, identity, and the body.

the on and off line community of www.bmezine.com (or the Body Modification ezine) use their modded identification in times of crisis. I say on and off line because although much of this community is virtual there is a good amount of these people that hang out together offline. Much of this is evidenced on BME members' IAM or personal membership pages and also in the proliferation of many local BME inspired events that range from ritual flesh-hook suspensions to bbqs and parties. It is also worth noting that the subjects of this presentation are either from the U.S. or Canada. I chose the examples used in this paper because they use themes that are common in the BME community and because I think they offer up interesting points of entry in considering the larger body-art modification community.

What is Ideology?

Ideology has several definitions and uses. This presentation relies heavily on sociologist Ann Swidler's definition of ideology in her book *Talk of Love: How Culture Matters*, which explores how people use different cultural scripts or metaphors for their love relationships and how such usage alters in times of crisis. Swidler views ideology as a specific modality of culture in relation to empowerment (95). So before defining ideology, it will be necessary to briefly describe what she means by culture.

Culture, for Swidler, is made up of the following: “[t]rained capacities to think and feel”; it helps to “internalize skills, styles, and habits”; it is used “to delineate group boundaries”; and “offers ideas and images that constitute a view of the world” (73-75). Most importantly is how culture works. The model she proposes is the “‘identity’ model. The fundamental notion is that people develop lines of action² based on who they already

² A line or strategy of action is best understood by reference to Swidler's notion of culture as a repertoire or toolbox. In other words, it's the culture one has internalized and uses in approaching everyday situations.

think they are” (87). This is of utmost importance in a discussion of body modification as an ideology. Especially, if we consider what has been said of postmodern identity as plastic and reflexive, no longer is identity ascribed, it is achieved or chosen. This makes for a more self-conscious sense of identity.

The collective culture of body modification is loose and difficult to pin down, at times. Rather than offering up some systematic worldview, the general subculture revolves around identification. Since a self-identified and coherent culture of an explicitly named and self-referential “modified culture” is emerging (somewhere between parallel and collective behavior, see Bainbridge, p. 368-369), but not necessarily formalized and organized politically—in comparison to black, queer, or feminist culture, for example—the most obvious cultural marker is the modified body. Although, it can be argued that sub-groups within the larger modified body phenomena are clearly defined and self-aware: e.g., modern primitives. This lack of formalization—or status as an organized social movement—makes their subcultural identity of central importance, especially when that identity is put into question, or is used explicitly to pathologize one’s cultural or personal experience.

Broadly speaking, Swidler likens ideology to a worldview. More specifically, she uses it in contrast to the terms of common sense and tradition. “An ideology is an articulated, self-conscious belief and ritual system, aspiring to offer a unified answer to problems of social action” (96). However, we must not be misled by the term system. It should not be understood so much as a logically consistent model—even Swidler admits

Such as internalizing the concept of time, without such a cultural notion, how would one be able to navigate the corporate, 9-5 culture?; Lines of action are “ways actors routinely go about attaining their goals. ... Culture affects action by shaping that repertoire of routine, natural styles, skills, and habits that together organize and sustain a strategy [i.e., line] of action” (82).

this (99). Instead, we might consider it to be a set or collection of cultural signs that become a “unified answer” when engaged. Ideologies (especially, subcultural ones) are less coherent in themselves than made coherent as a result of being engaged around specific identity issues or power struggles. In her essay “Culture in Action” Swidler notes of ideologies that “rather than providing the underlying assumptions of an entire way of life, they make explicit demands in a contested cultural arena” (279). Underlying assumptions are left primarily to common sense and tradition.

Common sense is “unselfconscious as to seem a natural ... part ... of the world;” and tradition presents itself as “fixed” and an “expected [part] of life” that “establish[es] expected forms of conduct, even when people consciously feel quite disaffected from those traditions” (96). For Swidler, then, ideology is not only an articulated system of signs, but also a self-awareness that coheres around a specific social problem. Her definition also implies an oppositional nature because it is contrasted with common sense, which Swidler derives from hegemony or the “dominant conception of the world” (94-95). However, she does little to infuse an explicit notion of conflict within her definition of ideology. Conflict will be important to our discussion, however, because it fosters a sense of crisis, which is needed to in order to help create the social space necessary to engage ideology.

In *An Introduction to Ideology*, Marxist and critical theorist Terry Eagleton examines the origins of the term ideology and how it has been used in various ways since its springing forth from the head of Enlightenment thinker and French revolutionary Antoine Destutt de Tracy while imprisoned during the Reign of Terror. Eagleton addresses such a lack of conflict in the sociological use of ideology. Although, he agrees

with the sociological point of view that ideology “provides the ‘cement’ of a social formation ... which orients its agents to action” he emphasizes that such a usage “too often [has a] depoliticizing ... effect, voiding the concept of ideology of conflict and contradiction” (222).

Eagleton’s insight and analysis of the many faces of ideology will be helpful here. In addition to emphasizing conflict, Eagleton notes other necessary characteristics of ideology: it is subject and action oriented, universalizing, and naturalizing. Subjective is not to be considered synonymous with private. Ideology is subjective in that it is “subject-centered” or identity-based. The utterances “are to be deciphered as expressive of a speaker’s attitudes or lived relations to the world” or the dominant culture (Eagleton, 19). This could be considered an engaged subjectivity.

This quality of engagement points to the universalizing or “making public” quality of ideology. Universalizing, Eagleton explains, is the processes of making “values and interests which are ... specific to a certain place and time” and projecting these onto “the values and interests of all humanity” (Eagleton, 56). I would like to nuance this term a bit, especially the “all humanity” part. First and foremost it is the tendency to engage the public. The immediate public, at times, may also be the lived world or universe, so that it could be considered “all humanity” as far as the subject is concerned. Secondly, the scope of the engagement will necessarily expand past the specific place, time, and individual because it is engaging the values and interests of the dominant society.

A consequence of engaging the lived world is the tendency for proponents of an ideology to naturalize their interests. Naturalizing is an attempt “to identify [beliefs and interests] with the ‘common sense’ of a society so that nobody could imagine how they

might ever be different” (Eagleton, 58). For purposes of this presentation, naturalizing has less to do with completely supplanting existing notions of what is considered natural or God given, than a re-alignment or re-framing of pre-existing notions of what is natural.

The most important consequence of all these characteristics is that they are necessarily action-oriented. In Eagleton’s words ideological discourses “must be translatable ... into a ‘practical’ state, capable of furnishing their adherents with goals, motivations, prescriptions, imperatives, and so on” (47). This action oriented-ness is also implied in Swidler’s reference to culture as influencing a person’s line of action by providing certain cultural tools, which incidentally shape what kind or type of action is possible.

Finally, it is important to return to one of the points Swidler has made about ideology: that it is “articulated” or uttered. Swidler studies how people talk or articulate their positions on love and marriage. Beyond this talk, though, she also has a lengthy section on semiotic codes.³ Her description mostly revolves around behavior. Her study, taken as a whole, then, would tend to look at articulation as something both verbal and non-verbal (i.e., bodily or behavioral)⁴. Eagleton describes the discourse aspect of ideology as follows:

Ideology is a matter of ‘discourse’ rather than of [mere] ‘language’ ... It represents the points where power impacts upon certain utterances and inscribes itself tacitly within them. ... the concept of ideology aims to disclose something of the relation between an utterance and its material conditions of possibility, when those conditions of possibility are viewed in the light of certain power-struggles central to the reproduction ... of a whole form of social life” (223).

³ “A semiotic code is a self-referential system of meanings in which each element in the system takes its meaning not from its inherent properties or from some external referent, but from the meanings created by the code itself” (Swidler, 162). [e.g. normative gender: people are assigned gender based on genitalia and expected to act as either male or female and all action is understood within this framework , as well.]

⁴ In the book *Semiotics for Beginners* published both online and in print Daniel Chandler, lecturer in Dept. of Theatre, Film, and Television Studies at University of Wales, Aberystwyth, breaks semiotic social codes into the following categories: verbal, bodily, commodity, and behavioral.

Eagleton's description of the discourse or articulation of ideology gets to the center of the conflictual aspect of ideology: power-struggle. This points to the understanding that discourses and semiotic codes are social constructs that constrain and facilitate power by defining proper and improper action.

Considering these characteristics: *ideology (especially an emergent subcultural one) is an identity-based and centered, self consciously chosen use of culture that articulates an active and conflictual engagement of the dominant culture.* Although, this definition is useful, it is seemingly static. In other words, it seems that ideology is somehow always “on” or always on the tip of a subject's tongue. It is necessary, then, to return to Swidler in order to nuance the function of ideology and view it as something that is turned “on” or engaged at certain times while turned “off” or not engaged at others.

Swidler talks of settled and unsettled lives (personal) and periods (social). Her point is that “we cannot look to the characteristics of the ideology alone for a full understanding of its causal significance” (103). Rather, she wants to draw our attention to the greater social context. She posits that ideologies tend to be engaged in times of crisis. I want to extend her argument to include that the reality of unsettled times and crises is grounded primarily in the perception of individuals or groups, rather than primarily in material reality (Smith, 1998; for subcultural perception of outside threat p. 152; for perceptions and beliefs being “real in their consequences” p. 173). For material reality always needs to be perceived or interpreted in order to be understood. Perception is the lived experience of material reality and cannot be thought of in terms of being unreal and

thus degraded as false (Eagleton, 22). So, it is exactly with this understanding of unsettled times or unsettling experiences both perceived and material that ideologies as defined above become engaged. That ideologies are self-conscious and articulated points to the interdependence between one's identity and ideology. It is exactly over issues of identity and the body that body modification is engaged as an ideology in the larger Western context.

Body Modification and Identity as Ideology:

Identity is a common theme in the articles on BMEzine. There are many reader editorials that discuss crises that develop when their modifications confront social norms or vice versa. In one posting, a soon-to-be-modded high school student is annoyed and perplexed by his school's policy, which mandates that bandages be worn over all facial piercings if students wish to avoid expulsion:

[E]verybody has the right to do what they wish to their body. A nose ring should not affect anybody's rights to anything. A tattoo should not have an affect [*sic*] on your future. By suspending and expelling our children from school due to their modifications, we are telling them that ... they must change their appearance and look more "normal" to satisfy others, and not themselves.

We, the students, do have ONE weapon,. This is a new act passed by Congress regarding freedom of expression in the form of things such as clothing, piercings, etc. The second is the good old First Amendment [or freedom of speech].

There are many things that make this excerpt interesting. One is that the student is identifying with the modded community even though he is not yet modded. This quality, if isolated, speaks to the power of identity within the body modification community.

Within the framework set forth in this paper, it is evident that this student responded ideologically toward this attack on modified students. The student clearly articulates, an oppositional, subjective-engagement of dominant culture and attempts to naturalize body modification with rights language. For example, he states that

“[E]verybody has the right to do what they wish to their body,” as well as a direct reference to the U.S. Constitution’s Bill of Rights.

Suddenly, this issue is not just about an individual or a group of students at a specific school, but about the rights of an entire populace organized or cohering around the issue of body modification. As an emergent ideology, body modification must still rely on the language of common sense and other traditions. The student borrows heavily from rights language and from the common-sense adage that people *should be themselves*. (Consider Carl Elliott’s references to scripts of authenticity yesterday.) This student’s articulation of a body modification ideology came about because the subject’s lived world (i.e., school) became hostile to his desire to become modified. This example represents how ideologies are engaged in unsettled times.

Culture Work:

Another example of how a body modification ideology can emerge in unsettled times is presented in a 2002 article by Shannon Larratt, the editor and founder of BMEzine, entitled “Body Modification as a Form of Class Consciousness and Class Warfare” (www.bmezine.com/news/pubring/20021029.html). The title recalls Marx’s argument that the proletariat must become aware of itself as a class before it can move toward social change. Larratt also alludes to an unsettled period for the modified community, thus creating a social environment ripe for ideological engagement.

An important aspect of this excerpt, as well, is that it represents what sociologist Richard L. Wood in his study of community organizing within churches located in Oakland, California describes as “culture work.” This consists of “building skills, generating a vision, and engaging participants’ emotional lives” (Wood, 163).

Larratt begins by informing his audience of the crisis: “No one likes to admit it,

but there is a war for survival going on between those who choose to lead public modified lives, and those who believe this lifestyle is wrong. ... this ... war is being fought, and [I] will propose plans of counterattack that strengthen our collective stance without alienating the generally neutral mainstream population.”

This statement brings us back to an important aspect of ideology: “that it is an articulated, self-conscious belief ... system, aspiring to offer a unified answer to problems of social action.” What Larratt goes on to suggest is highly self-conscious and offers a unified answer to a specific social problem that centers on identity and empowerment. When encountering a person who is rude and disrespectful, for instance, a modified person should “... not ignore the advice of first turning the other cheek and attempting to resolve the confrontation with [kindness] and polite manners. Don’t be surprised if by doing that you shatter that person’s misconceptions and make life more pleasant for the next modified person.”

This example of culture work by Larratt exemplifies some of the earlier comments on culture: that culture trains us to think and feel; it helps us to internalize new skills, styles, habits; is used to determine group boundaries; and provides a worldview. It is exactly through an explicit shaping of culture that ideology tools people to engage in specific ways in unsettled times.

Having addressed how individuals conduct themselves, Larratt moves on to encourage something more oppositional. He suggests that modifiers join together and form public campaigns: “[W]e need to be vigilant and responsible in dispelling these myths through even-handed public information campaigns of our own, along with ensuring that members of our community behave responsibly and safely when interacting

with the general public, so as not to provide ammunition against ourselves.” Such a call to action hints at what Eagleton thinks is essential to ideology: that it be politicized.

Public campaigns would suggest a move toward formalized political action.

If such a call to action is heeded then it could easily move the modified community from a mix of parallel and collective behavior into a social movement. Perhaps, with the right political opportunity—which could come about with state and federal attempts at regulating and defining acceptable body modification practices—this loose community could become a social movement (McAdam, 697). Larratt ends his article with the imperative: “solidarity of the modified.”

Suggestive Data:

Recently, I attended a tattoo convention in Nevada where I conducted 42 surveys. All of these people were modified with over 80 percent having multiple types of modifications—mostly tattoos and piercings. Although, what I am about to propose is simply suggestive and not representative of the larger modified community, the survey provided some interesting data. Almost 70 percent of the participants strongly agreed or agreed with the statement: “My modifications help me to express who I really am.” When the participants were asked if their modifications represented “a deeply felt personal significance” in their lives over 75 percent strongly agreed or agreed.

Within the context of this exploration of body modification as ideology, it has been noted that identity is key. This data suggests that people that are modified consider it an integral part of their identity. People use culture based on who they think they are. It is interesting to consider what could happen if modified individuals ever really did act in solidarity, or were forced to, for some political reason. Of course, this possibility was

beyond the scope of my survey, however. I have taken two examples from BMEzine to illustrate what happens on an individual level. Each one of these people were confronted as a modified person and had to respond. Another interesting point to consider is whether or not just having a modified body may represent an ideological discourse in itself.

Body as Battleground: The Broader Implications of a Body Modification Ideology

Issues surrounding modification deal with the body as an intersection of the private and the public. In this sense, the body is a battleground on which the individual struggles with social norms in an attempt at self-definition and self-empowerment. A reader editorial on BMEzine invokes martial metaphors to describe this struggle:

“Getting this piercing done was supposed to be my own, private guerrilla warfare—there [are] a lot of situation[s] in every day life which force us ... to do things we don’t like [so] if I’m forced to take out my earrings ... it doesn’t mean that I’ll give up easily. This little tongue bar became my statement of who I am—I’m still modded and I want to be modded in spite of adversities!”

In the collection of essays *The Body: Social Processes and Cultural Theory*, Arthur W. Frank writes that the body is “the intersection of ... institutions, discourses, and corporeality” (49). This intersection can be thought of as a battleground. On this battleground, cultural scripts (i.e., ideological discourses used by an individual or group), institutions (e.g., social norms), and corporeality (marked with identity) collide. Within the subculture of body modification, an agent acts against societal norms, in an attempt to change and alter those norms by scraping, poking, and cutting into the dominant culture’s naturalized or “natural/normal” body.

Body modification inscribes the body with a message that conflicts with dominant

culture or is in opposition to it. Even though some forms of body modification may be thought of as becoming the norm, it would still be unusual to see a CEO of a major insurance or law firm, for example, with a facial tattoo. Just consider the scandal that surrounds cyclist David Clinger who was kicked off his Webcor-sponsored team for his Maori-style facial tattoo. Because modifying the body is an identity-centered, self-conscious articulation of opposition upon the surface of what Larratt terms “public skin” (which is already inscribed with notions of being “natural” or “God given”) it can be considered an ideological discourse.

Modification of the body “aims to disclose something of the relation between [itself] and its material conditions of possibility, when those conditions of possibility are viewed in the light of power-struggles central to the reproduction ... of a whole form of social life” (Eagleton, 223). Such power struggles are evident when dominant culture seeks to restrict modification. Such attempts consequently create unsettled times, which foster ideological engagement.

In a BME editorial, Tuan⁵, a tattooed and pierced advocate of body modification describes his years as a “cop.” This occupation, it seems, entails a high degree of embodiment of social norms; the duty of a police officer is to enforce the norms of society. To some degree, these norms become laws—or they may operate just outside official law (e.g., police officers often look for “deviant” types). Tuan notes that in 1989, “an instructor who came in from the ... gangs division ... gave a two hour lecture on tattoos, [their] meaning and how you could identify the criminal element by them.” Tuan’s comments support the notion of the body as battleground and how the post-

⁵ None of the names used in this section are real; pseudonyms are used in order to protect the writers’ identities.

modified body can be considered an ideological discourse. It demonstrates that people's bodies are controlled and monitored, even forcibly coerced to conform to what is considered "normal" or "natural." Modifications can be seen as deviant or even criminal. Tuan's modified body comes to speak for itself as an ideological discourse. Tattooing and piercing are flashpoints of individual assertion and instances of control over one's body—even though, ultimately, one could be targeted as criminal by the "authorities." Another example of resistance through modification can be seen in the story of Andrea, a woman who has sought to redefine a body that was the scene of violence and abuse. Sociologist Victoria Pitts notes this method of reclaiming the body in her extensive analysis of body modification: "women who have been victimized by violence or oppression can 'reclaim their sexuality [and body] ... by having a nipple or labia piercing; this becomes a reclaiming ritual'" (11). As a young girl Andrea was raped by her mother and her schoolteacher. These extreme acts of violence against Andrea led her to initiate such reclaiming rituals. She reestablished control, ownership, and definition over her own body, thus gaining a sense of individuality and autonomy. Andrea claims that she was able to: "stitch [her] shell back together with a few pieces of metal." This process continues for her today. She reminds herself of the connection between her mind and body through piercing. These flashpoints upon the surface of the contested body, which have intense and life-altering implications, are driven by themes of renewal and self-discovery common in body modification discourse.

Andrea posted on the BME website in response to proposed legislation sponsored by Bill Heath, a Republican representative in the Georgia State House of Representatives. Heath's bill proposed banning all female genital modification, including piercing.

According to a news report, “The bill [HB1477] would make such mutilation punishable by two to 20 years in prison. It makes no exception for ... religious or cultural custom. ... Even [consenting] adult women would not be allowed to get the procedure” (Fox News online: March 24, 2004).

The proposal of this bill created an unsettled period in which Andrea’s own identity became threatened. It also threatened to delegitimize her body modification practice by defining it as criminal and mutilative. Although, Andrea already used body modification self consciously, this legislative threat propelled an ideological use of the body and body modification discourse.

Of interest in Andrea’s posting is her use of “rights language.” In making her argument, she states, “It seems that there are people out there who choose to undermine this natural freedom.” She is referring, of course, to the freedom to modify or control one’s own body and appearance.⁶ Her claim that modification is a “freedom” taps into a value that could be considered sacred within American culture. The use of rights language as a cultural script within body modification ideology is rampant in the reader editorials posted on BMEzine. In this way, one can detect the ideology’s borrowings from the individual-rights tradition, and, more interestingly, it shows an alignment with the civil rights movement disclosing a tendency to naturalize body modification.

⁶ An interesting argument could be made here as there is a legal tension between what she *says* of “natural freedom”—which rings of “natural rights”—and *does* in the free exercise of such rights. Going back to works by James Madison and Thomas Jefferson while in the House of Representatives in Virginia, we can see the use and implication of the notion of Lockean natural rights. Such rights actually supercede any legislation and government, especially when it comes to matters of conscience (see Witte 2000, on “conscience” in First Amendment). Yet, when looked at through the lens of an exercise of such conscience, which is arguably where Andrea is speaking from, we see some precedent for Federal and State restrictions. The most recent Supreme Court ruling on free exercise of religion (see Hammond 1998, for matters of conscience as legal foundation for religion in his review of Supreme Court cases) in *Oregon Employment Division v. Smith* (1990) the Court upheld Oregon law over free exercise. The case dealt with peyote use by members of the Native American Church.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, I believe this exploration of body modification clues us into the seriousness of body modification to people that are modified. By using a Swidlerian framework it becomes clear that some body modifiers use their modified identity as an ideology in unsettled times. Such explicit use of modified culture and the aspects of tradition and common sense scripts or strands that such a modified ideology borrows from provide a glimpse into what may become a more coherent and consistent body modification worldview that is progressive and in line with the human rights tradition.

I have not made it my business here to explore the modified subjects' intentions behind their modifications, rather I feel it is more important to explore how modified subjects live in an environment that is potentially hostile to them. Such an exploration of this tension discloses the very real struggle for power over definition and acceptance of alternative identities and body practices that exist in the Western world.

Although, I have used sociological theory to help elucidate this self-conscious use of cultural identity, I believe that the evidence that body modifiers should be taken seriously is embedded in their very own narratives. In other words they are not merely dolls that we as academics can manipulate with our theoretical play. This is not to say that we should not point out the multiple readings their modifications inspire, but rather that we should take a "both/and" approach. We can take them seriously and uphold their dignity as well as critically consider their identities and practices within the larger social context. Such an approach is after all possible as evidenced in Victoria Pitt's work *In the Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body Modification*.

We must keep in mind that such a body modification ideology is dynamic and

transformative. I want to leave you with an interesting theme that emerged in my survey. When given an open ended question about whether or not being modified has affected their worldview or beliefs, over 30 percent responded by stating that it had made them more accepting and less judgmental. This also showed up in two test runs of my survey conducted with BME members. Again, this data is not representative, but I believe it points to an area of exploration of modification that is sometimes neglected: its meaning and the real effects it has in people's lives.

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*All anonymous “readers editorials” or postings used in this essay were from www.bmezine.com.