

ARTSIMAGE

Visual culture matters

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The trails of light which they seemed to leave behind them in all kinds of curlicues and streamers and spirals did not really exist, but were merely phantom traces created by the sluggish reaction of the human eye, appearing to see a certain afterglow in the place from which the creature, shining for only the fraction of a second in the lamplight, had already gone. It was such unreal phenomena, the sudden incursion of unreality into the real world, certain effects of light in the landscape spread out before us, or in the eye of a beloved person, that kindled our deepest feelings, or at least what we took for them.

W.G. SEBALD, *Austerlitz*

Published with the contribution of the University of Bergamo, Department of Letters, Philosophy, Communication.

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Tattoo and the Moving Image

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Aracne editrice

www.aracneeditrice.it

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via Vittorio Veneto, 20
00020 Canterano (RM)
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ISBN 978-88-255-3698-0

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1st edition: February 2021

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The Elastic Screen Cinema and the Modern Imaginary of the Skin*

BARBARA GRESPI, ALESSANDRA VIOLI

The trajectories of two apparently different types of image that are the filmic one — elusive and phantasmatic — and the tattooed one — engraved in the flesh — are intertwined at many levels. Their various and biunivocal ties date back to the origins of the cinematic medium, although these two visual forms have become more tightly welded together in the contemporary context. Nowadays, movies are one of the main sites for the exposition of the tattooed skin, which is no longer relegated to subcultural and deviant contexts but rather perceived fully as a fashion strategy for self-expression¹. *Vice versa*, the skin of cinephiles becomes a crucial means through which the cinematic imaginary can spread (as the popular trend of film-inspired tattooed would seem to suggest). In the US, the relationship between cinema and tattoos was recently revamped, thanks to the work of the Seattle based street artist Cheyenne Randall (from *Hollywoodnt*, 2016, onward): using Photoshop, he applies fake tattoos on the skin of film stars of all times. His best images represent celebrities from the forties and fifties, highlighting the pre-existing ‘hipster’ allure of some actors (such as James Dean) and bringing out the

* Alessandra Violi is the author of the paragraph ‘Things that move’ and Barbara Grespi of the paragraph ‘Imaginary movements’.

¹ For an overview of the aesthetics of contemporary tattooing and its identity value from a semiotic perspective, see *Iconologie del tatuaggio: Scritture del corpo e oscillazioni identitarie*, ed. by Gianfranco Marrone and Tiziana Migliore (Milan: Meltemi, 2018).



Figure 1. Cheyenne Randall, *Fancy Audrey*. © Cheyenne Randall. Courtesy of the artist.

ideology of the candid skin underlying the mediatic bodies (from the dazzling whiteness of Marilyn's skin, stained by virtual ink, to the unreal smoothness of Audrey Hepburn's complexion, defiled by syncretic cross-cultural decorations) (fig. 1). In all of these cases, the process of creativity is triggered by the perceived proximity between cinematic images and the practice of tattooing; a proximity, as we said, that is not immediately evident.

This collection aims to address this pervasive perception and to substantiate it through a variety of research paths. First, it will question the existence of a possible genealogical link between cinema and tattoos, elaborating on the nature of the filmic image and specifically its illusionary and animated quality. Modern culture as a whole pushed toward the idea of a dynamic, ever-changing and 'living' image, and indeed we can find traces of

this trend also in key texts of modern literature, with precise reference — and this is the key point — to the utmost ‘elasticity’ of tattooed figures. What paved the way for these two fields, cinema and tattoo, to become intertwined? How did the idea of skin as a quasi–photographic surface start to be forged? Which bodies — narrated, scientifically examined or staged — fueled the parallel between film and tattooed skin between the nineteenth and the twentieth century?

Things that move

James Joyce’s body–book *Ulysses* (1922) offers a clue in this direction. Famously praised by filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein for its experimental ‘cinematicity’, Joyce’s novel offers a veritable ‘encyclodermia’² of the modern fascination with skin marks, singling out precisely malleable tattoos as an intriguing point of convergence between the pictorial writing on the body and the emerging culture of the moving image. In chapter 16 of *Ulysses*, we are introduced to the character of D. B. Murphy, a seafarer who bears three tattoos on his chest: ‘an image tattooed in blue Chinese ink intended to represent an anchor [...] the figure 16 and a young man’s sideface looking frowningly rather’, who turns out to be the face of his tattooer. ‘Dragging his shirt more open’ in full spectacular display, Murphy, now rebaptized ‘the exhibitor’, excites the ‘unreserved admiration’ of all the onlookers, including that of a character aptly named ‘Skin–the Goat’, by performing his ‘special knack’ and ‘curious effect’ for turning the tattooed face into a mobile image: ‘pulling the skin with his fingers’, he suddenly manipulates the frowning profile to make it look ‘cursing’, and then again stretches it into a ‘forced smiling’, making the image morph — as his name, Murphy, suggests — to suit the wondrous tales he has to tell about it³.

² I borrow the term from Abbie Garrington’s discussion of *Ulysses* and the skin in *Haptic Modernism. Touch and the Tactile in Modernist Writing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 108.

³ James Joyce, *Ulysses* (1922) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), p. 516.

In a book which, as is well known, Joyce imagined as a living, moving body, to the extent that each chapter was made to correspond with a somatic organ (16 is ‘nerves’), Murphy’s elastic tattoo and the allusion to (goat) skin parchments are far from episodic. Rather, they seem to encapsulate *en abyme* the whole logic of *Ulysses* as a gigantic moving tattoo, and of Joyce as a ‘tattoo-artist’ who responds to a cultural obsession of his time. This is, after all, what is suggested by the other two images tattooed on the trickster’s skin: the figure 16 — we are in the sixteenth episode of *Ulysses*, where everything is happening on the sixteenth day of June, 1904 — and the blue Chinese ink that draws an ‘anchor’, a word which sounds like ‘*encre*’ (ink) in French. Moreover, as has been astutely suggested, the name Murphy is etymologically connected also to the Italian word ‘*smorfia*’ and to the expression ‘*fare una smorfia*’ — that is, grimacing and pulling faces —, as well as to the Italian (Neapolitan) game of chance known as ‘*la smorfia*’, a book of dreams (here Murphy stands for Morpheus, the god of sleep) in which dream-images are identified with the corresponding numbers and pictures to be played in the ‘*lotto*’ game. In this magical dream system, number 16 corresponds to the figure of the artist, ‘*il pittore che dipinge*’⁴. What is this miniature *Ulysses* doing there, inked on Murphy’s skin as a magical tattoo to be animated and morphed?

For one thing, as cultural critic Steven Connor points out, ‘the implication of the skin in the idea of the book is more than mere metaphor. For centuries of manuscript and book production, books were primarily things of skin’⁵, though anthropodermic books survive today mostly in horror fiction or in Disney’s magic worlds: think of the arcane book of incantation in Disney’s *Hocus Pocus* (Kenny Ortega, 1993), whose patchworked skin-binding even features, on its front cover, an eye that awakens, moves and sees. Yet, beginning with the illustrations of Renaissance anatomy books, whose titles often appeared inscribed upon a

⁴ Jennifer Levine, ‘James Joyce Tattoo Artist: Tracing the Outlines of Homosocial Desire’, *James Joyce Quarterly*, 31.3 (Spring 1994), 277–99 (pp. 283–84).

⁵ Steven Connor, *The Book of Skin* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004), p. 42.

flayed human skin, the analogy between the skin and the page was refuelled in Joyce's time, bearing witness to a desire to turn writing matter into a somatic medium. Realist writers were often dubbed 'epidermists', 'inscriptors' and chroniclers of skindeep surfaces⁶, a definition that Joyce took literally in the other, most famous tattoo(er) of his whole *oeuvre*, the character of Shem 'the Penman' in *Finnegans Wake*, probably inspired by Cesare Lombroso's studies of primitivism and tattoos. In what may be regarded as a primordial technique of inscription as tattooing, Shem actually turns his own body into a continuous scroll filled with words, with ink made partly from his own excrement⁷. He becomes a living book of skin.

This image of an epidermal surface materially written from the inside, and bearing the imprint of inner physiological motions, emphasises the double-sidedness of skin and its position as a conduit or mediator for a continual movement between inside and outside, the body and the world, that the physical matter of language strives to reproduce and communicate. The body is regarded by Joyce as a veritable prototype of the book's (inter)mediality, with writing itself understood as a form of *cine-mato-graphic* tattooing, the inscription (*graphie*) of a certain inner movement — including, as in Murphy's tattoo, the movement of dream images — on the surface of the skin-page. While this may partly explain Eisenstein's enthusiasm for the pictography of Joyce's writings, with their 'zigzags of aimless shapes, whirling along'⁸, the Joycean move also foreshadows the sensibility for the primitive, embodied mediality that would be later portrayed by artworks such as Claudio Parmiggiani's *Deiscrizione* (1972),

⁶ Ariela Freedman, 'Skindeep Ulysses', *James Joyce Quarterly*, 46.3–4 (Spring–Summer 2009), *Joyce and Physiology*, 455–68, (pp. 455–56).

⁷ James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (1939), (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), pp. 185–86.

⁸ Sergei Eisenstein, 'A Course in Treatment' (1932), in Sergei M. Eisenstein, *Film Form: Essays in Film, Theory*, ed. and trans. by Jay Leyda (London: Dennis Dobson, 1963), pp. 84–107 (p. 105).

in which a living body–book, totally engraved by ideograms, alchemical symbols and magical alphabets, bears an unused white page on his knees⁹.

The nineteenth-century cultural imaginary of marked skin nourished the connection between the body and media in various ways, especially in the field of medicine that Joyce knew well, given his aborted studies as a medical student. With dermatology emerging at the time as a medical specialization, skin marks and diseases became the object of intense visual and aesthetic fascination by doctors, who often engaged the arts to represent and display what looked like veritable skin–shows. The father of French dermatology, Jean–Louis–Marie Alibert, conducted his teaching with the aid of paintings and lithographs in the clinic’s garden, where he set up a display of his patients as living pictures to be looked at: oil paintings of skin diseases were hung on the linden trees, while, between the trees, the patients were ‘mounted on wooden platforms, with the names of their diseases in one–inch letters across their chests’¹⁰, competing with the pictures as *tableaux vivants* of ‘painted’ skin–canvasses. This medical vogue inspired some painters to revive the ancient equivalence between the skin and the canvas: for Kokoschka, for instance, as James Elkins notes, ‘the paper or canvas surface is already a skin, and he worries it, scratching, gouging, and tattooing his figures and background’¹¹. But the opposite case was also frequent: some tattooed bodies acquired the status of walking works of art, as ironically recounted by H. H. Munro (a.k.a. Saki) in the short story *The Background* (1911), where a man with his back fully designed by the illustrious Italian master of tattoos Signor Andrea Pincini, becomes a living masterpiece, internationally renowned, contended and expertised by art critics all over Europe¹².

⁹ See the catalogue for the exhibition *Skin Deep. Il corpo come luogo del segno artistico*, ed. by Luigi Meneghelli, Giovanna Nicoletti, Giorgio Verzotti (Milan: Skira, 2003).

¹⁰ Freedman, ‘Skindeep *Ulysses*’, p. 458.

¹¹ James Elkins, *Pictures of the Body. Pain and Metamorphosis* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 117.

¹² Saki (H.H. Munro), ‘The Background’, in *The Penguin Complete Saki* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), pp. 121–24.

Even more interestingly for our purposes, the phenomenon of hysterical ‘dermographism’ that captivated the nineteenth century medical imagination made actual cutaneous writing a likely (albeit pathological) possibility. Often observed in clinics such as the Paris Salpêtrière, dermographism was the name given to the mysterious words and figures that appeared on the patients’ skins, either at the slightest touch of the doctor’s fingers, or even at a distance, through hypnotic suggestion. These (often female) bodies, described as ‘living writing paper’ or ‘human lithographies’, fostered comparisons with tattoos, while complicating the latter’s status as static surface images. Unlike unmovable pictures etched on the skin, dermographic marks were spectral, evanescent tattoos, whose projection on the skin surface often lasted only a short span of time and seemed to originate from the inside of the body, as a visual trace of the patients’ inner nervous or psychic movements. Introducing ‘Skin Writing’ (1897) to the American readers of *The Strand Magazine*, Jeremy Broome thus observed that

[T]he human skin possesses great pictorial possibilities, as tattooing [*sic*] shows. But this article has nothing to do with tattooing. I have seen a man with a map of Bulgaria on his back; another with a tortuous Danube printed as plainly between his shoulders as it is on an atlas; and still another with his name on the roof of his mouth. But there was no tattooing about it. [...] Such effects may be obtained by the simple contact of certain skins with any blunt instrument – a pencil, the end of a pen, the tip of the finger–nail [...]. Granted a proper epidermis and a specially suggestible nervous system, you will be able to make upon your own or somebody else’s body any signs, inscriptions or marks which caprice or imagination may suggest.¹³

Though regarded as pathological symptoms, or as relics of archaic superstitions (Broome mentions Medieval stigmata and witchcraft), ephemeral and film–like tattoos were thus beginning to compete, in the cultural imaginary, with the durable images engraved in the flesh, and foregrounded a susceptibility of skin

¹³ Jeremy Broome, ‘Skin Writing’, *The Strand Magazine. An Illustrated Monthly*, vol. XIV (1897), 453–56 (pp. 453–54).

to ‘signs, inscriptions and marks’ that even the newborn technical media seemed somehow to confirm, or, indeed, to take as their model. While dermatography owed its huge popularity in the visual culture of the time mainly to photographic reproductions of skin writing (Broome’s article is amply illustrated), the medium of photography itself was, from its very inception, couched in a vocabulary of bodily skins and dermal photosensitivity.

Oliver Wendell Holmes 1859 essay, ‘The Stereoscope and the Stereograph’, begins his account of photography by recalling Epicurus’ and Lucretius’ ancient theory according to which all natural bodies shed skins of themselves, and are ‘continually throwing off certain images like themselves, which subtle emanations, striking on our bodily organs, gave rise to our sensations’¹⁴. Now that the world is again understood as a living, touching skinscape involved in perpetual movement, the magic of photographic technique seems therefore that of capturing the epidermal emanations of the world, turning the process of photographing into an update of primitive skin-hunting: as Wendell Holmes puts it, ‘every conceivable object of Nature and Art will soon scale off its surface for us. Men will hunt all curious, beautiful, grand objects, as they hunt the cattle in South America, for their skins’¹⁵. More importantly, however, for Wendell Holmes photo-graphing itself may have to do less with technology than with the sensitivity of skin to light impressions, with bodies tattooed by light: ‘The lightning from heaven does actually photograph natural objects on the bodies of those it has just blasted, — so we are told by many witnesses’¹⁶.

This bizarre genealogy of photo-graphy was picked up in 1905 by astronomer Camille Flammarion in a curious study of the effects of lightning, and especially of ‘images produced by lightning’, on the human body. The comparison with tattoo is here made explicit, despite the evanescent quality of these images, which, as in dermatography, tend to fade and disappear into

¹⁴ Oliver Wendell Holmes, ‘The Stereoscope and the Stereograph’, *The Atlantic Monthly*, 3 (1859), 738–48 (p. 738).

¹⁵ Holmes, ‘The Stereoscope and the Stereograph’, p. 744.

¹⁶ Ivi, p. 748.

skin a short time after their photographic impression. In an 1896 report on a man hit by lightning, we read that ‘like a tattooer who would use a photographic process, [lightning] has admirably reproduced on his body the image of a fir tree’; the (almost pre-Joycean) case of a sailor whose skin has been impressed by lightning with the figure of number 44, leaves Flammarion wondering: ‘was this not a tattoo?’¹⁷ Even more magic-like to Flammarion are those cases, reported in Bath in 1857, in which lightning has ‘photographed a landscape *inside* the skin of two sheep’, offering a ‘radiography’ of sorts, well before the discovery of Röntgen rays in 1895. The animals’ inner skins tattooed by lightning were immediately exposed to the public, providing, as Flammarion comments, yet another example of imprints that ‘used the living body as a screen’¹⁸.

As these various examples show, the imaginary of tattoos as inscriptions of and on the body enjoyed a wide circulation in the age of the moving image, especially at the juncture between the archaic and the new, magic and technology. It thus comes as no surprise that this kind of living, embodied mediality should often be evoked in relation to pre-cinematic devices and the fantastic techniques of image-animation offered by trickfilms. Again Joyce’s *Ulysses* provides a useful cue.

In the chapters immediately preceding Murphy’s movable tattooed face, Joyce’s notorious fascination (and actual involvement) with the medium of cinema had generated an array of visual tricks and effects, all explicitly appropriated from proto-cinematic devices, cartoon animation and stop-motion trick films. For instance, in chapter 15, called ‘Circe’ and illustrating the ‘technique of magic’, Leopold Bloom had similarly ‘contract[ed] his face so as to resemble many historical characters’¹⁹, borrowing his facial skills both from the superimposition effects of Georges Méliès’s film *Le Roi du Maquillage* (1904), and from the face metamorphoses of Leopoldo Fregoli, the protean quick-

¹⁷ Camille Flammarion, *Les Caprices de la foudre* (Paris: Flammarion, 1905), p. 250, p. 268 (my translation).

¹⁸ Ivi, pp. 276–77.

¹⁹ Joyce, *Ulysses*, p. 404.

change artist whose performances Joyce knew well, especially in their filmed projection with a special screen known as the *Fregoligraph*²⁰.

What attracts Joyce in these shows is, again, the nexus between the somatic and the cinematic. Méliès's *Le roi du Maquillage* begins with the French director drawing a bizarre face on a blackboard, and then, by means of a fade, embodying its features and animating them in various guises. Likewise, in the film sections of his shows, Fregoli's own morphing body stood behind the 'Fregoligraph', whose skin-screen and pellicular transformations were thus intended as a representational doubling of the performer. In both cases, the body itself was the matrix of movable images, a field of motion and the medium for their animation. The sailor's tattoo pulling faces in *Ulysses* chapter 16 thus seems to suggest a move back from technology to bodily technique. As his name indicates, Murphy's tattoo, *morphed* by a simple trick of his fingers, is a rudimentary art of animation and a pre-cinematic device of sorts, the somatic prototype for a book that strives to combine the old magic of body writing and the new enchantment of cinema, the modern 'embodiment par excellence of the pellicular imagination'²¹.

In this respect, while Joyce's reference to the tattooed *sailor* makes a bow to the exoticism of the painted skin — most famously incarnated in nineteenth-century literature by the Polynesian tattooed characters in Melville's sea fiction — his model for the moving tattoo may well have stemmed from early modern European 'painted people' and the peculiarities of their magical markings. As historians of tattoos point out, well before James Cook's famous importation, in 1769, of the word 'tattoo' and its

²⁰ It may be worth recalling that Joyce was responsible for opening, in 1909, the first hall exclusively devoted to cinema in Dublin; see *Roll Away the Reel World. James Joyce and Cinema*, ed. by John McCourt (Cork: Cork University Press, 2010); on *Ulysses*' borrowings from Méliès and Fregoli, see, in this volume, Marco Camerani, 'Circe's Costume Changes. Bloom, Fregoli and Early Cinema', pp. 103–21. On *Ulysses*, the senses and modern technologies see also Sara Danius, *The Senses of Modernism. Technology, Perception and Aesthetics* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002), especially chapter 4.

²¹ Connor, *The Book of Skin*, p. 46.

Polynesian practice, the European Renaissance had seen a veritable flurry of publications on corporeal inkings. Here, as well as signifying the stigma for barbarian otherness (John Bulwer's *Anthropometamorphosis*, 1653, being a case in point), tattoos were described as arresting precisely for their being living, moving images. This is the case, for instance, of John Speed's account of ancient British tattooing in *Historie of Great Britaine* (1611), a book whose frontispiece depicts a tattooed ancient Pict (the Picts were so called by the Romans because they were 'painted' people) and dwells, with intense fascination, on how these 'Barbarians [...] have from their childhood diverse shapes of beasts incorporate upon them; and having their marks deeply imprinted within their bodies, looke how their growth for stature, so do those pictured characters likewise increase'²². Changing as the body changes, expanding or contracting in all its parts, the tattoo is viewed as an intriguing embodied object that moves and grows, as an image enlivened on a moving, expanding surface, much like Murphy's elastic face. Later in the account, the beasts so lively portraited on those bodies are even described lying 'dead together with the murdered bodies of the Picts': given that "the tattooed image 'lived' on the skin, so it should 'die' in a gesture of respect for the body that supported it"²³. Animation was what made these images magic and active, allowing their bearers to 'wear the universe' and gain power, for instance, over animals by having their characters impressed on the flesh²⁴, but also on their beholders, whose bodies were so captivated and affected by the images' illusion of liveliness as to be almost drawn into them, incorporated into their epidermal world. As anthropologist Alfred Gell observes in his study on tattoos, 'marked, patterned, or scarred skin draws in the gaze of the onlooker, exercises the power of fascination, and lowers certain defences. The

²² Cited in Juliet Fleming, 'The Renaissance Tattoo', in *Written on the Body. The Tattoo in European and American History*, ed. by Jane Caplan (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), p. 69.

²³ Fleming, 'The Renaissance Tattoo', p. 69.

²⁴ Jennipher Allen Rosecrans, 'Wearing the Universe: Symbolic Markings in Early Modern England', in *Written on the Body*, pp. 46–60.

eye [...] so to speak, enters the body of the other'²⁵. We may therefore include the archaic practice of skin pictographs among those magic techniques of enchantment that Gell sees as precursors of the modern enchantment of technology²⁶: after all, what Joyce aimed at, with his cinematic tattooed novel, was precisely to move the reader's body into his illusion of animated motion, eliciting what Eisenstein identified as the objective also of film movement, 'the material, kinesic processes aimed at a physical incorporation of the text into the reader's body'²⁷.

The modern, especially nineteenth-century, emphasis on tattoo as an indelible mark of degeneration, may thus have eclipsed its performative role in the genealogy of image animation; a role which the essays in this volume reactivate and reinfect in the light of the cinematic medium. Joyce's often quoted dictum that 'modern man has an epidermis rather than a soul' was, in fact, preceded by his observation that 'Shakespeare and Lope de Vega are responsible, to a certain point, for cinematography', as they began to theatricalise the material, 'intense desire to see and sense'²⁸ which lay the ground for the epidermic frenzy of modern culture.

It is not by chance, then, that tattoo as a moving image reemerged in sideshows, fairgrounds and circuses, where skins fully covered with images retained a magic aura, and often became living screens that moved and changed thanks to the tattooed bodies' physical performances; American writer Djuna Barnes (originally named Djalma, after a tattooed character in Eugène Sue's *Wandering Jew*) was inspired by the visual spectacles of Coney Island to choose tattooed 'freaks' (a trapezee artist, a bear fighter) and tableaux vivants as living models for

²⁵ Alfred Gell, *Wrapping in Images: Tattooing in Polynesia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 36.

²⁶ Alfred Gell, 'The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology', in *The Art of Anthropology. Essays and Diagrams* (1999), ed. by Eric Hirsch (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2006), pp. 159–86.

²⁷ Cited in Ana Hedberg Olenina, *Psychomotor Aesthetics: Movement and Affect in Modern Literature and Film*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. xxxvi.

²⁸ James Joyce, 'The Universal Literary Influence of the Renaissance', *James Joyce in Padua* (New York: Random House, 1977), pp. 19–23, p. 21.