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From Parlour to Studio

The Sensory Experience in Contemporary Tattooing Spaces

Abstract. *Tattoos have historically been marginalised and associated with deviancy. However, as they become mainstream, the experience of giving and receiving a tattoo changes, and so does the studio environment. This paper analyses design elements that set the contemporary tattoo studio apart from the traditional parlour, and how they shape the sensorial and atmospheric experiences of individuals. I present an ethnographic case study of a contemporary studio in Australia, suggesting that design interventions influence the way practitioners and clients engage with the space, with each other, and with tattoo culture. I use this case to build an argument for the importance of an atmospheric understanding of this design practice, as it signals an effort to detach itself from a stigmatised subculture.*

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Introduction

Focusing on Western tattoo culture, Atkinson (2003) divides its development in six moments: the Colonist/pioneer era (1760s-1870s), when Europeans first encountered tattooed indigenous people; the Circus/carnival era (1880s-1920s), when tattooed individuals performed as "freaks" on circus for money; the Working class era (1920s-1950s), when tattoos became more popular, associated with military and working men; the Rebel era (1950-1970), when tattooing was again rejected by society for its association with criminality; the New Age era (1970-1990), when tattoos became popular among a progressive middle-class as a sign of self-expression; and the Supermarket era (1990-2003[2]), when the tattoo industry expanded and reached a greater audience through conventions, magazines and TV shows.

Atkinson's classification is useful for a historical overview but needs to be further developed as tattoo culture continues to change and become mainstream: the recent "ratification" of tattooing (Kosut, 2014) elevated its status and social acceptance, and the images and language around it have changed – for example, terms like "tattooist" and "gun" have been replaced by "tattoo artist" and "machine" respectively (Martin, 2019). However, contemporary tattooing is also unique in an experiential level, and I argue that an atmospheric understanding of tattooing would help capture the nuances of this phenomenon, because it would account for the sensory and affective aspects of the intimate and embodied experience of giving and receiving a tattoo.

Here I adopt the understanding that atmospheres comprise how material and immaterial inputs are felt in sensorial and emotional ways by individuals who experience

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2. Atkinson (2003) refers to it originally as "1990-present." I suggest the end date of this period as 2010s.

them subjectively and in interaction with others and the environment, learning from the definitions in affective (Anderson, 2009), æsthetic (Böhme, 2016); and design (Sumartojo and Pink, 2019) literature. Understanding atmospheres is important as they mediate the way people engage with each other and their surroundings. In a practical sense, they cannot be created – an environment can be crafted in a certain way that allows them to emerge, but they ultimately rely on the way individuals will subjectively experience them.

In the context of tattooing, I consider the tattoo shop as the environment where the atmospheric experience takes place. It contains material inputs such as tools – tattoo machines, inks and needles, safety and cleaning gear – and the interior design, including floor to ceiling colours and textures, furniture and decor objects. These are complemented by inputs like the sounds of background music and the machine noise, the smells of cleaning products, the ambient temperature among others. Immaterial inputs can also refer to the overall "mood" of that space and how it evokes certain familiar sensations, such as "safe" or "welcoming." All these inputs are captured sensorially by people in that environment – practitioners and clients – and experienced emotionally by them, drawing from their expectations, previous experiences, and the intimate interactions happening between them in that particular moment.

Traditional tattoo shops were once dark and cluttered spaces, with loud music, bold colours on the wall, along with imagery such as skulls and sexualised women – a spatial representation of a subculture associated with deviancy, rebelliousness, lower class, and other forms of stigma. The vintage style of these early studios remained ingrained in tattoo culture, just like the American traditional tattoo designs never went out of style. Therefore, many elements of the old-school tattoo culture are still present in tattoo shops today, either because they have been in business for decades and preserved their original look, due to nostalgia or preconceptions of what a tattoo studio should look like.

However, as the tattoo industry becomes increasingly mainstream, some studios are redefined as bright and carefully curated spaces, far from the cluttered old school parlour or the flashy gangster shop. These particular types of space are discussed by Martin (2019) as "Neo-Bohemian" studios – the ones that arose in the post-industrial neighbourhoods and cater "to the middle class, artists, and students who are looking for a unique and more hip experience by entering an area that also showcases inner-city, urban, and lower-class characteristics" (54). By doing so, these studios are attempting to detach themselves from stigma and appeal to an audience that responds to such sensibilities.

It is no coincidence that the contemporary tattoo studio shares similarities with art galleries, coffee shops, beauty salons, design coworking spaces, and other types of businesses that are popular in gentrified neighbourhoods. They are all products of the same taste regime described more prominently by Jonathan Bean – influenced by the clean domesticity of Scandinavian design in Hygge lifestyle, the faux-artisan authenticity of Kinfolk magazine (Bean et al., 2018) and widely disseminated online through Pinterest and Instagram. Nonetheless, limiting the appeal of such spaces to their adherence to trends would be relying on an assumption that all clients have the same cultural capital that allows them to experience it in a uniform way. This position overstates the symbolic and underestimates the sensorial and subjective ways people experience their surroundings – attributes that are particularly relevant in the context of tattooing, as a highly intimate and embodied experience.

I argue that the contemporary studio, as a designed space, has specific sensory components that afford atmospheres to emerge as individuals to engage sensorially and affectively with each other, the space, and the culture of tattooing. In the next section, I present an ethnographic case study of one of these contemporary studios, in which I identify design interventions that make this space different from preconceived images of the traditional parlour, and discuss how these shape the sensorial and atmospheric experiences of clients and practitioners there.

Case Analysis

This ethnographic study was performed in 2019 and early 2020 at a contemporary studio located in an inner suburb of Melbourne, Australia, on a busy commercial street. The shop front is quite sober – etched glass windows and door with black frames and one hanging sign with the studio name. Inside, the open plan space is minimal in decor, but usually full with people. The waiting area is small, with a wooden bench and black pillows. Right in front of it, there is a wall made from light wood with potted plants and a white neon sign that says "it was all a dream" in cursive writing – a corner that clients constantly photograph and share on social media. On the right side, the wall is fully mirrored with a wooden counter – much like a beauty salon. However, instead of the seats facing the mirror, the workstations are composed of clean black massage beds, wheeled seats, and metal trolleys (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Overview of the studio space, Daniele Lugli, 2020

There are skateboards and a couple big pieces of artwork on the walls – colourful contemporary portraits of famous hip-hop musicians, painted by a local artist. The genre is often played as background music, along with pop and contemporary R&B, giving the studio an urban appeal that is popular with the young audience. These clients often bring along friends for their appointments, so the sound of laughs and chatter are also common. These are the predominant sounds in the space, since most artists use contemporary rotary machines that, unlike the traditional coil machines, are fairly silent. This not only makes a difference in the ambient sound, but also in the experience – as E., one of the artists says, the clients prefer them because the quiet machines feel less "scary." As a practitioner, she also favours them as they are light-weight and vibrate less.

When asked about the space, E. says that the studio where she worked before was dark and decorated with skulls, Japanese armour and masks, which made it "creepy"

in the evening. She prefers this one, because it is brighter and popular among female clients. The wooden front wall with the plants is another highlight, as she says it makes a great background for pictures of the finished tattoos that she posts on social media.

One client, T., sees the studio as an inclusive space, suiting both people who want something small and delicate as well as hardcore tattoo fans. She says that the clean and minimalist decor of the space stands out – "It's not what you would expect from a tattoo studio" – and this æsthetic, along with the fact that the studio has several female artists, makes it an inviting space for her. However, she prefers to book her appointments on Sundays, since the studio is quieter on those days – for her, the most important thing in a tattoo studio is cleanliness, so she can feel safe, but she also wants it to be a somewhat private, comfortable and relaxed environment.

I asked T. about her previous experiences with tattoo studios. She said they looked very traditional and were spaces where most of the dark spaces with old school tattoo designs on the walls, red and black as the main colours, and heavy metal playing on the radio – "the kind of place that your grandmother would be shocked to go to!"

Discussion

In this analysis, I do not intend to limit the atmosphere of the studio to the æsthetic elements of the space or focus on the possible symbolic meanings of such elements. Following Böhme (2016), I look away from the objects' *expression*, such as form and functionality, to concentrate on the *impressions* they make and how they contribute to the embodied experience. I also acknowledge that the ways individuals perceive and make sense of those sensory inputs is ultimately subjective, and certainly the human interactions between tattoo artists and clients are a meaningful and complex part of the experience. However, such engagements are mediated by space and materiality.

Feelings and sensations such as "inviting," "comfortable" and "relaxed" mentioned by T. are more likely to emerge in an environment like the contemporary studio. The clear and bright space increases the sense of safety (Böhme, 2016), and the layout, similar to a beauty salon, evokes familiarity even for a first-time visitor. In addition, the non-specific æsthetic is more accessible for a mainstream audience – "inclusive" in the words of T. – as opposed to the traditional tattoo parlour that displays elements of traditional tattooing so ostensibly that clients might feel unwelcome if they are not part of that subculture.

Despite being a small corner and relatively distant to the action of tattooing, I identify the wooden wall with the plants and the neon script as a significant part of the experience. It is one of the first things clients encounter when entering the space, and what they see while waiting. Within the taste regime described by Bean et al. (2018), the natural characteristics of the corner evokes homeliness on a sensorial level and, as a carefully curated decor space, it affords the studio a sense of luxury, dissociating it from the lower-class stigma and validating the work performed there as "tasteful." Moreover, it is playful, since the quote invites people to imagine what is the said "dream" (my informed guess is that it refers to the lyrics of "Juicy" by The Notorious B.I.G.), and it is active in the sense that it participates in people's routines – the clients capture it to post on social media, publicly "checking-in" at the studio, and the artists use it as a background to photograph their finished work.
The design interventions are not limited to the presence of certain elements, but also the absence of others. The absence of darkness and certain imagery, such as the

"creepy" skulls and masks mentioned by E., makes the space less intimidating for people who, like T., are looking for a relaxed tattoo experience. The absence of the loud machine noise, also in E.'s words, makes the clients feel less scared about the procedure, and might even decrease their physical discomfort. This challenges traditional understandings that tattoos are "earned" symbols of endurance to pain and, consequently, who feels entitled to carry them.

These examples are evidence of an ongoing movement within the now mainstream tattoo culture to move away from the long-standing stigmas attributed to the tattoo subculture. As pointed by Sumartojo and Pink (2019), atmospheres relate not only to how places feel, but also to what they mean. Therefore, while this can be pertinently problematised as commodification (and indeed has been by authors like DeMello, 2000), the fact that these businesses flourished in an industry rooted in tradition signals a deeper shift in the forms of engagement between people and space, and between individuals within that space creating a potential for further change.

Conclusion

In this paper, I argued for an atmospheric understanding of tattooing, looking at the tattoo studio as a designed space where individuals engage sensorially and affectively with their surroundings, with each other and with tattoo culture more broadly. I presented an ethnographic case study of a contemporary studio and discussed how the presence of certain design elements and the absence of others afford the emergence of an atmosphere that distances mainstream tattooing from the stigmas and preconceptions of traditional tattoo subculture. As a single case analysis, this study is only a starting point for further investigation on the topic. The findings, however, are helpful for signaling other aspects to be observed in future studies, such as the smaller actions surrounding the act of tattooing, and how gender might play a role in this context.

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