The tattoo as a document

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate how tattoos can be considered documents of an individual's identity, experiences, status and actions in a given context, relating to ideas stating that archival records/documents can be of many types and have different functions. The paper also wants to discuss how tattoos serve as a bank of memories and evidence on a living body; in this respect, the tattooed body can be viewed as an archive, which immortalises and symbolises the events and relationships an individual has experienced in his or her life, and this in relation to a specific social and cultural context.

Design/methodology/approach – To discuss these issues, the authors take the point of departure in the tattoo practice of Russian/Soviet prisoners. The tattoo material referred to is from the "Russian Criminal Tattoo Archive". The archive is created by FUEL Design and Publishing that holds the meanings of the tattoos as explained in Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopaedia Volume I-III. The authors exemplify this practice with two photographs of Soviet/Russian prisoners and their tattoos. By using a semiotic analysis that contextualises these images primarily through literature studies, the authors try to say something about what meaning these tattoos might carry.

Findings – The paper argues that it is possible to view the tattoo as a document, bound to an individual, reflecting his/her life and a given social and cultural context. As documents, they provide the individual with the essential evidence of his or her endeavours in a criminal environment. They also function as an individual's memory of events and relationships (hardships and comradeships). Subsequently, the tattoos help create and sustain an identity. Finally, the tattoo presents itself as a document that may represent a critique of a dominant society or simply the voice of the alienated.

Originality/value – By showing how tattoos can be seen as documents and memory records, this paper brings a new kind of item into information and archival studies. It also uses theories and concepts from information and archival studies to put new light on the functions of tattoos.

Keywords Archives, Documentation, Documents, Memory, Evidence, Tattooing

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Among Russian/Soviet prisoners, tattoos have long played a significant role as evidence of the individual's criminal orientation and personal characteristics. For example, a tattoo of a spider web with a spider walking down or up indicates the prisoner's desire to leave or not to leave criminal life behind; a tattoo of a knife "through the neck" indicates that the prisoner committed murder in prison, while little bells around the ankles mean he has served his sentence in full (FUEL, 2017a, b).

This study aims to investigate how tattoos can be considered documents of an individual's identity, experiences, status and actions, relating to ideas stating that archival records/documents can be of many types and have different functions (Briet, 2006, p. 10; Buckland, 1991, p. 357; Lund, 2012, p. 743). The study wants to discuss how tattoos serve as a bank of memories and evidence on a living body; in this respect, the tattooed body can be viewed as an archive, which immortalises and symbolises the events and relationships an individual has experienced in his or her life. The study also wants to propagate that tattoos are bound to individuals, the primary reason being that the tattoos are carved into the skin of its bearer and stay (if not removed) with the mortal body of that particular individual. It goes without saying that the meaning of the tattoos are lost when the body dies, it is the bearer who gives them their intrinsic meaning. This individual aspect of the tattoo is complemented by an understanding of tattoos as a communicative tool within a group of people. In this regard, the focus is on the social functions of documents, i.e., the role documents play in the social life (Frohmann, 2004), how they organise communicative actions within a community (Brown and Duguid, 1996) and also how they enforce power in a
social context (Smith, 1974, 1990). Thus, we see the tattoo as a document taking an active part in the construction and reflection of an individual's identity, experience, actions and status. And, we see this construction as conditioned by the communicative community at hand.

We shall mention some important previous studies on tattoos to get an insight in the nature of this practice. Naturally, there are many studies on the historic and social/cultural significance of tattoos (Rubin, 1988; Sanders, 1988; Sanders and Vail, 2008; Fedorenko et al., 1999; Doss and Ebesu Hubbard, 2009; Falk, 1995; Fisher, 2002; Braunberger, 2000; Guest, 2000; Jones, 2000; Gustafson, 2000; Oettermann, 2000; McCarron, 2008; Connor, 2004; Arnshav, 2014), but this study primarily gives consideration to studies connecting tattoos to isolation and criminality. The studies of Caplan (1997, 2000a, b) have been valuable. She demonstrates that in a western context, tattoos have always characterised marginalised individuals, or “the other”, and that this perspective became cemented when eighteenth-century sailors took on Polynesian tattoo culture and the marked bodies of the “savages”. Moreover, this encounter gave Europeans the word tattoo, from the Polynesian root *tatu*, *tatau* to “mark” or “puncture” (Caplan, 2000a, pp. xi-xxiii).

Caplan also describes how in Europe in the nineteenth century, tattoos became part of the practice that emerged in conjunction with the documentation of identity, for example, in connection to the development of passports, identification cards and birth certificates in a legal context. Even in medicine, tattoos came to play a role as identity markers. Both in emerging criminology and forensic medicines, tattoos were viewed as identifiers of a certain type of person: the criminal (Caplan, 1997, pp. 106-142). Italian Cesare Lombroso was one of the criminologists who highlighted the significance of tattoos for identifying criminals: his criminology practice was indeed based on the idea that groups and individuals could be categorised based on external characteristics and that the “criminal archetype” could be recognised through certain facial features, hair thickness, the dimensions of the ears and head, and also the presence of tattoos (Caplan, 2000b, p. 156f; Lombroso, 2006, pp. 1-36).

Tattoos have not only functioned as identification markers, but also as identity markers. Margo Demello has shed light on the significance of tattoos among American prisoners when it comes to demonstrating belonging to a certain group in a prison context. In her paper “The Convict Body: Tattooing Among Male American Prisoners”, she reports on the double function of tattoos and the problems that can arise when criminals are to be reintegrated into society, when these inscribed identity markers are revealed as prison tattoos (Demello, 1993, pp. 10-13). Michael P. Phelan and Scott A. Hunt also show how tattoos contribute to constructing identity. In the paper “Prison Gang Members’ Tattoos as Identity Work: The Visual Communication of Moral Careers”, they demonstrate how one can follow an individual’s “career” within a criminal organisation, for example, through his or her tattoos (Phelan and Hunt, 1998, pp. 277-298). These latter two studies, thus, emphasise the function of the tattoo as an identity-creating phenomenon and will form a referential framework to our study.

Not much has been written on tattoos and archives but one important study to mention is Kirsten Wright’s (2009) paper “Recording ‘a very particular Custom’: tattoos and the archive”. Here, she addresses the question of how records of tattoos traditionally are created and arranged in archives. She concludes that the conventional way, by which they normally are treated, prevents a proper understanding of the tattoos, i.e., “of the creation of the tattoos, the context in which they are created, the surrounding rituals and how they function as a form of recordkeeping” (Wright, 2009, p. 109).

Some previous studies on the body and archives deserve to be mentioned. One is Inge Baxman’s (2009) “At the Boundaries of the Archive: Movement; Rhythm, and Muscle Memory: A Report on the Tanzarchive Lepzig”. Baxman states that, since it is the written culture that has been appreciated as the primarily knowledge form in the western culture,
the culture and knowledge produced in and by dance and movements, i.e., knowledge stored in the body and in sensory memory, have not been integrated in our archival practices. However, with a more performance-focused archive, these experiences can be recorded and our knowledge of our movement culture, both in present and past, can be enhanced. Another study also addressing the archive in relation to dance and bodies is André Lepecki’s “The Body as Archive: will to Re-enact and the Afterlives of Dances”. Lepecki’s (2010) explicitly talk about bodies as archives when he discusses how the dancing body has a capacity to archive past work, i.e., that the body becomes an archive through a process of re-enactment of choreographic activation of the body (pp. 34-46).

This study aims to show how the composite tattoos on a human body function as a both abstract and tangible archive, a composition of memories and evidence relating to events, actions and motives. The meaning of these events, actions and motives and also memories are to a large degree constructed within a specific context to which the individual is bound. The body is in our study both the medium and the storage facility of the tattoos; they exist upon, within and outside the individual body.

This study will provide some empirical examples to illustrate our ideas on tattoos as documents and the tattooed body as an archive. The empirical examples emanate from the tattoo-tradition among Russian/Soviet prisoners. The tattoo material referred to is from the “Russian Criminal Tattoo Archive” and consists of photographs of tattooed Soviet/Russian criminals in prison, as well as drawings of tattoos. The archive is created by FUEL (2017c) Design and Publishing, which also owns the rights to the photographs and drawings. The drawings of the prisoners’ tattoos are by prison guard Danzig Baldaev from the beginning of his career in 1948 into the 1980s (FUEL, 2017d). The photographs are from two sources. Sergei Vasiliev (2008), who worked for the newspaper Vecherny Chelyabinsk, photographed tattooed prisoners in Soviet/Russian prisons (FUEL, 2017e). A selection of Vasiliev’s photographs (from the years 1989-1993) appears in Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopaedia Volume I-III. Criminologist Arkady Bronnikov (2014), who worked for the Soviet Ministry of Internal Affairs from the mid-1960s for 20 years, took photographs of tattooed convicts for police use (FUEL, 2017f). Digital reproductions of photographs by both photographers can be viewed via FUEL’s website, Vasiliev’s photographs under a section bearing his name and Bronnikov’s under a section entitled “Police Files”.

Certain ethical considerations have been essential in this study: above all, consideration has been given to ensuring that the individuals in the image material remain anonymous to the greatest extent possible (no names attached), and that more degrading images are avoided. The term criminal should also be problematized in this context. In the study, the term criminal is viewed as a social construction that is generated based on the prevailing conceptions of society. Accordingly, in this study, the term criminal is a designation based not on the idea that the prisoners are criminals, but rather, that they are viewed as criminals due to actions they have carried out, and primarily based on the penalties to which they have been sentenced.

Theoretical perspectives of the tattoo as document and the tattooed body as an archive

Suzanne Briet (2006) questioned the traditional connection of the concept of document to study already in the mid-twentieth century, when she asserted that in principle, a document could be anything that can function as a representation of something:

[...] any concrete or symbolic indexical sign [indice], preserved or recorded toward the ends of representing, or reconstituting, or of proving a physical or intellectual phenomenon (p. 10).

Michael Buckland has, in turn, adopted and developed Briet’s broad definition of the document concept. Buckland (1997) posits that information technology led to a rift in the
notion of the document as only text, because information systems provide information which function as a document, primarily via the evidence-bearing aspect, without using the traditional physical forms of documents (i.e. as text) (p. 807f). Buckland (1991) asserts that information can be latent in all kinds of objects, and that it is the context which determines an object’s significance as informative and knowledge forming, and not its constraint to a certain medium or form (p. 357). Thus, according to Briet and Buckland, a document can comprise all types of signs and symbols which signify/describe/represent and demonstrate an object, a thought, an idea or a notion. Based on this definition, a tattoo is considered here to be a document that signifies something: for example, a memory, an event, a person, and an identity. We are also inspired by Smith’s (1974, 1990), Brown and Duguid’s (1996) and Frohmann’s (2004) ideas of documents as social and communicative agents. Based on their ideas, we would like to see tattoos as documents performing action in society, i.e., as documents that function and act informatively among people in a given context.

The somewhat all-encompassing definition of document, presented by Briet and Buckland, can be related to discourses prevalent in the context of archival science. There are discussions within this field about the role of documents and archives in relation to evidence and memory as well as the subversive potential which is contained in documents and archives depending on who is using the information in store and to what end.

Terry Cook (2013) asserts that traditionally, the archive served a function as an evidence bank in which documents are collected and stored according to society’s need for continuity and authenticity (p. 97ff). According to Cook, the concepts of evidence and memory are intertwined in the document’s function over time. A collective memory can only be built on credible submissions and the value as evidence is replaced over time by cultural and social value, which creates individual and collective identities (Cook, 2013, p. 101ff). Laura Millar (2006) has reflected on the relationship between the document’s value as evidence and its function as memory in relation to the human brain’s memory capacity, and asks whether the archive as memory exists beyond the human brain’s interpretive capacity (pp. 105-126).

Eric Ketelaar also considers the document’s value as evidence, but primarily as an intermediary of different perspectives. Ketelaar questions the notion that archives and their official documents convey absolute truths. He posits that evidence from individuals, especially after conflict, comprises an individual’s perspective that can differ from the official narrative and, thus, constitutes a source of nuanced collective memory (Ketelaar, 2008, pp. 9-27). Several studies illustrate the role of archives in conveying perspectives that differ from the majority society’s normative perspective, often based on the minority’s struggle for their rights (Caswell, 2012; Maliniemi, 2009; Whorley, 2002). Archives and documents possess a subversive potential depending on who uses them and for what purpose.

Catherine Hobbs (2001) considers archives left by individuals to be an important component of shared cultural heritage (pp. 126-135). Hobbs (2001) stresses that individuals convey an intimacy which cannot be found in transaction-based “evidence archives” (p. 127f). According to Hobbs (2010), documents from individuals can originate from all life events, for example, notes on a plane ticket (p. 225). Sue McKemmish (1996) also points out the individual’s contribution to our archives, but favours the structured personal diary as a legacy worthy of comparison with the organisational archive (pp. 174-187).

In relation to tattooed bodies, we will use the concept of archive as follows.

As a collection of documents displayed on a human body that functions both as evidence of actions and events and memories of those actions and events. Both evidence and memory are building blocks to an identity, in this case the criminal identity. The fact that the documents, i.e. tattoos, are bound to an individual body, make them form a personal biography of sorts, like a personal diary. The understanding of this both abstract and tangible archive is to be found in the life of the individual that carry this “archive”, and in
the context in which they were created, i.e., among a group of people governed by their own set of laws and practices.

Since record might be the more obvious term in the context of archives and also has a strong connection to the concept of evidence (Yeo, 2007, pp. 319-326), it could seem appropriate to use it here instead of document. But in this study we would like to stress the active social functional aspect of the tattoos and also connect to the theories produced within the field of document studies, and because of this, we found the document concept to be more useful.

**Method and implementation**

To discuss these issues, we take the point of departure in the tattoo practice of Russian/Soviet prisoners. To analyse this practise, we use the material published by FUEL that holds the meanings of the tattoos as explained by Alexander Sidorov, Alexei Plutser-Sarno and Danzig Baldaev in *Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopaedia Volume I-III*. This is complemented by a very brief introduction into the contemporary Russian prison world (Sutyagin, 2014). We exemplify this practice with two photographs of Soviet/Russian prisoners and their tattoos. By using a semiotic analysis that contextualises these images primarily through literature studies we try to say something about what meaning these tattoos might carry. Our aim is not to give a complete analysis of the tattoos in the images, this would not be possible considering the fact that we do not have access to the individual’s perspective concerning the tattoos encarved on their bodies. We simply want to show the multi-layered function of the tattoo and its inherent power to create, sustain and enforce an identity within a given context.

Using a semiotic research method, the image analysis is based on the identification of primary and secondary meaning levels, where the primary level, the denotative, captures the immediate impression the picture creates. This level can usually be shared by everyone who views the image and is thus perceived as natural (Carlsson and Koppfeldt, 2008, p. 16ff). However, the image’s connotative level requires a reading of the significance based on culturally and socially conditioned associations (Carlsson and Koppfeldt, 2008, p. 18).

The analysis of the photographs will thus be conducted in two steps. First, the picture’s denotations will be described, including certain aspects of the photograph overall, though the focus will be on the tattoos. The next step is to capture the connotative level of the image via an analysis of the content of the various tattoos on the individual in the photograph. This analysis will be conducted with support from literature describing the tattoos, their symbolism, and the prison environment as a context. The tattoos’ connotations will be based on the individual bearing them (the man in the photograph), but will be separated from that individual when we do not know the true intentions behind his choice of tattoo design.

The photograph itself is a document consisting of an individual with tattoos as well as how the individual presents himself through the interaction with the photographer. The photograph as a whole is secondary in relation to the concentration of the semiotic analysis on the tattoos’ connotations, i.e., it is primarily the tattoo that is considered the document here.

**Thieves, the prison environment and tattoos**

The empirical material treated in this paper is produced in a Russian/Soviet context and the study will therefore begin with a brief presentation of some potential aspects of the contexts and conditions deemed central to the meaning and function of the tattoos.

The once imprisoned researcher Igor Sutyagin has drawn a picture of the contemporary Russian prison world, in which the prisoners’ culture is an important component (Sutyagin, 2014, pp. 19-41). Among other things, Sutyagin describes the stratification of the prisoners’ hierarchy in the contemporary prison environment. Broadly speaking, all prisoners are
divided into four main categories. The first group consists of professional criminals, and within this group there are *vory v zakone*, “thieves in law”, comprising the criminal elite. The majority of prisoners are individuals who have committed a crime, but who are not professional criminals, they are below the professional criminals. On the next level are prisoners who openly support the prison administration. Last is the lowest “cast” in the prison world, those who are deemed passive homosexuals (Sutyagin, 2014, p. 23).

Sutyagin views today’s prison culture as dependent on socialisation processes, which can be positive or negative. A form of positive socialisation is that no one is allowed to eat food that has fallen on the floor in order to prevent infection, given that sanitary conditions are often poor. Another example of positive socialisation is that is hygienic in nature is that in the prison, prisoners must learn to take care of their personal hygiene if they have not previously learned to do so. Prisoners who do not obey these rules are downgraded in the hierarchy (Sutyagin, 2014, p. 25f). An example of a negative socialisation process is that the former moral beliefs of individuals who have only committed minor or few crimes are overthrown, and the criminal hierarchy strengthens the criminal path by glorifying rebellion against authorities or crimes against the “residents” of the majority society. For example, stories portraying thieves as modern Robin Hood figures facilitate prisoners’ ability to adopt a new conception of right and wrong (Sutyagin, 2014, p. 28f).

According to A.M. Schrader (2000), tattoos play a long-standing role in prisoners’ socialisation process with one another. Schrader finds similarities between tattoo culture among Russian/Soviet criminals and Tsarist Russia’s categorisation of people, exemplified by branding the “vagabond” who refused to conform to the state’s laws and regulations. This rebellious attitude landed the “vagabond” at the top of the criminal hierarchy, and the marks of the penalty scale that Tsarist Russia branded onto his skin were later reflected among criminals who voluntarily tattooed the same symbols as a form of revolt against the state and authority (Schrader, 2000, pp. 174-192).

Alexander Sidorov (2008a) also asserts that the government’s marking of criminals in Russia can be seen as a prototype of the criminals’ tattoos. Sidorov tells us that until 1846, individuals sentenced to hard labour were marked with VOR, “thief”, on the cheeks and forehead. This was later replaced with KAT, the first three letters of the phrase “sentenced to hard labour”. The letter K was placed on the right cheek, A on the forehead and T on the left cheek. Sidorov (2008a) posits that a direct influence can be seen from this marking practice on Russian/Soviet criminals’ practice of sometimes tattooing inscriptions on their foreheads, eyelids and cheeks (p. 21ff). Sidorov places the beginning of tattoo culture among Russian prisoners and criminals in the late nineteenth century and asserts that the practice of tattooing was widespread in the early twentieth century (Sidorov, 2008a, p. 23).

The thief

The criminal archetype that this study is centred around is the thief, a criminal ideal within a criminal society. The reasons for this prominent position for the thief are not within the scope of this paper even though we probably touch upon those reasons.

The thief’s high position in the prison hierarchy and the role of the tattoo in that context can be illustrated through an episode from Soviet history. Sidorov describes how Stalin came to use prisoners, many of them professional thieves, in his army in the war against the Nazis. Many prisoners preferred to fight in the war and risk dying in battle over dying of starvation in prison (Sidorov, 2008a, pp. 27-31). But according to the “legitimate thieves” (*vory v zakone*) or “thieves in law” and their code, bearing arms on behalf of the state was not permitted. Anyone who did so would be declared a traitor and downgraded to serving the legitimate thieves if they returned to prison. Returned thieves who rejected a lower position in the criminal hierarchy formed their own groups and sided with the prison administration in the battle to control the criminal elite. As thieves, “traitors” possessed the
ability to decipher the tattoos of legitimate thieves and could then, with the prison administration behind them, force them somehow to adapt to prison rule. As a result, the legitimate thieves changed their tattoos (Sidorov, 2008a, p. 31ff). A dagger through a heart was previously a common tattoo design that the legitimate thieves changed by adding an arrow to the dagger, symbolising the thief’s desire to seek revenge against those who violated the thieves’ code. A compass rose tattooed on the shoulders appealed to the promise to never wear epaulettes (to never fight for the state). Unaware of these changes, the traitors gave themselves away by not having them on their bodies (Sidorov, 2008a, p. 33ff).

Alexei Plutser-Sarno (2003) has argued that the tattooed body of a vory v zakone can be seen as a linguistic object, where the tattoos comprise a symbolic language whose rules for decoding are conveyed orally within a closed circle and which reflects the individual’s life story, with all of the successes and failures of criminal life. Thus, according to Plutser-Sarno, tattoos comprise the thief’s evidence of his or her identity and can also be seen as his or her official document in this context (Plutser-Sarno, 2003, p. 27). There is a penalty for bearing false witness – having tattoos that are not based on actual events, i.e., lying about one’s identity via tattoos in an effort to raise one’s status in the criminal hierarchy. The false tattoo is cut away or the tattooed body part is amputated by fellow prisoners who follow the law and the thieves’ codes (Plutser-Sarno, 2003, p. 29ff).

Plutser-Sarno points out the tattooed body’s communicative significance on several levels. Prisoners can be used as couriers with tattoos conveying the message of the legitimate thieves to all prisoners: that which the criminal elite proclaim via their skin comprises the prison’s referential framework – the tattoos represent the thieves’ law (Plutser-Sarno, 2003, p. 29). Plutser-Sarno (2006) also asserts that tattoos can be viewed from a visual and social perspective (p. 33). One of several examples of the social function of tattoos consists in practice of demoting someone to a lower level in the criminal hierarchy through forced tattoos. These marks of shame (often pornographic motifs, playing cards in the suits of diamonds and hearts) function as identifying markers of thieves who did not pay their gambling debts or who are convicted sex offenders. The latter are given forced tattoos at the end of their incarceration (Plutser-Sarno 2006, p. 39).

Two photographs, prisoners and their tattoos
Two photographs are presented below, taken by two different people with slightly different approaches. The first is taken by photojournalist Sergei Vasiliev, who visited different prisons to learn about the prisoners’ lives and conditions, and observed in that context the prisoners’ tattoo culture (FUEL, 2017g). Vasiliev views the prisoners’ tattoos as art, or compositions, which tell a story (FUEL, 2017h). The other example is by criminologist Arkady Bronnikov (2014), who photographed Soviet prisoners and their tattoos for police use (FUEL, 2017f).

The two photographs will be interpreted based on the previously presented model and related to relevant literature sources (Plate 1).

Denotations of the image
The photograph shows a man who is stripped to the waist, standing with his body in profile but his face turned towards the camera. His right hand rests on the left side of his chest, just over his heart. On his left shoulder is a tattoo of an epaulette; the top of his right hand has a tattoo with an unclear motif and all fingers of the hand (except the thumb, which is hidden) have visible tattoos in various pattern formations. On his left upper arm is a man’s face and a hand holding a cross; this tattoo also consists of a cloud with an inscription. This tattoo may have been placed on top of a previous design. Below both shoulders towards the chest, the man has stars with at least six points.
His stomach up towards the chest is covered with a large tattoo whose elements cannot be discerned in the photograph; similarly, the man’s right arm is tattooed with several indistinguishable motifs.

**Connotations of the tattoos**

Based on relevant literature, we can find certain connotations. On FUEL’s website in connection to this photograph one learns that the man’s tattoos indicate that the prison is his home and that he is a thief (FUEL, 2017i). Sidorov (2008b) points out that the tattooed stars (below the shoulders) indicate an individual’s professional status as a thief, and that tattoo designs such as a crucifix, eagles, a cat face and military epaulettes traditionally represent the bearer’s authoritarian position in the criminal hierarchy (p. 382).

The ring tattoos may contain some information. The man in the photograph has on his middle finger a motif with two black triangle points that meet one another. Russian Criminal
Tattoo Encyclopaedia Volume 1 has a drawing similar to this tattoo with a description explaining that this motif may reflect an individual’s aversion to the prison administration and its designation of the individual as “anti-social” and as someone who does not follow the rules in prison (FUEL, 2003/2009, p. 134f).

The man in the photograph has on his ring finger what appears to be a black rectangle split in half. Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopaedia Volume 1 includes a picture of this common tattoo motif, with the description that it may be an individual’s testimony to coming to the zone as a child and having been accepted by the adults there (FUEL, 2003/2009, p. 136f). Sidorov (2008b) describes how a black rectangle with a diagonal white line in the middle can be seen today as an individual’s assertion that his or her life path began in juvenile prison (p. 389). Igor Sutyagin (2014) describes, from a contemporary perspective, how the neutral word zona, zone, for those who have experienced the Russian prison system, represents a penal colony or the prison world overall; the phrase “to be in the zone” therefore means to be in prison (p. 24f).

The inscription in the tattoo on the man’s left upper arm reads “communism only produces victims” according to FUEL’s (2017i) website. According to Sidorov, politically charged tattoos, with an explicitly anti-communist message, were common from the 1950s through the early 1990s. This could be expressed, for example, through a portrayal of Lenin or Stalin with horns or bared teeth, while police are depicted as devils, wolves or pigs (Sidorov, 2008b, p. 387).

The man in the photograph has several tattoos that are difficult to discern. But their very presence is interesting – they all comprise parts of a whole. Plutser-Sarno (2006) says that in order to understand the semantic meaning of tattoos, attention must be given to all tattoos on an individual’s body; they comprise, so to speak, parts of a whole (p. 35). However, by analysing individual tattoos, one can gain insight into aspects of a life, a single event, or a single memory. Perhaps the individual only conveys fragments of his life for interpretation and translation by the viewer? (Plate 2).

Denotations of the image
The man in the photograph has tattooed epaulettes on his shoulders and eight-pointed stars below his shoulders on both sides. Angled towards the chest is a pair of cat faces, one on each side. The stomach and chest are covered with a large tattoo depicting a woman with a child in her arms, and on either side of the woman is a figure, one of which appears to be kneeling. In the background is a church with six cupolas, which all appear to be crowned with a cross. On his right forearm, the man has a tattoo of a rose, and beneath the rose is a banner, possibly with an inscription; three letters can be glimpsed beneath the inscription. The man also has an indecipherable tattoo on his right upper arm. The left forearm shows a human figure and three letters can also be seen under this motif. On the right thigh, a man’s face can be seen rising up from a cloud, with a dagger between his teeth. The left thigh has a tattoo of a ship with dark sails.

Connotations of the tattoos
A central tattoo on the middle of the chest, usually a church or a cross, can represent a thief’s loyalty to his “guild”, that this person is pure and not tainted by treason (FUEL, 2017j). The chest is considered the greatest part of the body and is often tattooed with religious motifs, such as the Madonna figure seen here (the woman with the child in her arms), which may be based on Raphael’s Madonna from the Sistine Chapel, a common talisman among thieves (FUEL, 2017k). According to Sidorov, for example, the number of cupolas on a church can indicate the number of prison sentences; he also asserts that a cross over the cupolas can symbolise the number of fully served sentences (Sidorov, 2008b, p. 382).
The white ship with shaded sails on the man’s left thigh may indicate a travelling individual who moves from city to city (FUEL, 2017j). A silhouette of a sailing ship may symbolise the desire for freedom and sorrow over lost freedom (a tattoo motif among 1940s and 1950s prisoners who were prone to escaping) (FUEL, 2006, p. 154).

On the man’s right thigh one notices the genie that seemingly appears out of a lamp, this is according to FUEL’s website the symbol for drug abuse, or that the individual was sentenced to prison for a crime committed during the influence of drugs (FUEL, 2017j).

The man in the photograph has a cat face tattoo. According to Plutser-Sarno, the cat is one of many different identity markers for “thief” (Plutser-Sarno, 2006, p. 47). The letters the man has tattooed on his forearms may appeal here to a common tattoo practice of alluding to specific cities, people or places/buildings through abbreviations and acronyms (FUEL, 2006, p. 134f). However, we do not know what specifically the letters tattooed on the man represent.
The tattoo as document: identity, evidence and memory
Using Briet’s document concept as a starting point, tattoos are analysed here as documents and as representative, and the connotations identified above are now to be related to concepts such as evidence, memory and identity.

The tattoo and identity
It is clear here that primarily in twentieth-century Soviet Union and Russia, tattoos comprise both status and identity markers in relation to a special grouping within the criminal hierarchy, which they still do to some extent (Sidorov, 2008b, p. 382). The tattoos on the man in the first photograph indicate that he identifies himself as a legitimate thief, the foremost criminal within the criminal hierarchy, as shown by the stars below his shoulders and the epaulette on his shoulder. Also, his ring tattoos seem to show him as someone who does not obey to prison regime or any authority other than the law governing the criminal world. The political tattoo visible on the arm enforces the view that this man has positioned himself on the outskirts of society and within a group that is regulated by its own rules.

The man in the second photograph is also proclaimed as a thief with (the stars over the chest, the cat faces) the addition of being true to his own group as exemplified by the church dome. The Madonna and the child in the centre of the body connect his loyalty with a religious sanction, a talisman of sorts. The ship on the leg proclaims this man to be a wanderer, a vagabond, who does not stay at one place and also given the history of the vagabond within old Russian society an identity as someone who does not conform to a normative society. There is also the suggestion that this man has committed an offense during the influence of drugs, all due to the genie in the lamp motif on his thigh.

This somewhat brief introduction to the different meanings of tattoos within a given context, prison environment during the late Soviet era, shows the strong affiliation of tattoos with a criminal identity, they sustain and enforce a life choice. This reasoning is supported by Phelan and Hunt’s study of the use of tattoos among gang members in an American prison environment, where they start from the notion that tattoos reflect an ongoing construction of individual identity based on social belonging and related to social, cultural norms. Phelan and Hunt (1998) assert that in this context, tattoos communicate life stories and provide information about a moral career ladder in a given context, and that they prove as well as convey an individual’s loyalty to the group (p. 278ff).

Using reproductions of the tattoos of members of the Nuestra family (a branch of the Mexican mafia), Phelan and Hunt analyse the implications of the tattoos. The interpretations are based on interactions with prisoners and information collected from prison staff and through observations. Phelan and Hunt show that tattoos in this context can portray a prisoner’s religious faith, how many people the individual has killed, and what the individual’s criminal orientation is. The individual’s position in the Nuesta family depends on how many people he or she has killed; the ranks are based on a military-inspired model with titles such as lieutenant, captain and general (Phelan and Hunt, 1998, p. 280ff).

Individuals seeking membership in Nuestra obtain a tattoo indicating loyalty, a motif representing geographic identity (the Nuestra family is from the north). When the individual is approved for membership, he receives a specific initiation tattoo which does not itself say anything about the individual, but only clarifies that he has committed to following a certain code. The individual has yet to carry out any deeds worthy of inscription during this neophyte period, but as he completes the actions expected of him, the tattoos take shape. Each rank in the family’s hierarchy has its own markers (Phelan and Hunt, 1998, pp. 284-291).

Based on interviews with and observations of American prisoners, Margo Demello has also sought to hone in on the socialising and identity-creating aspects of tattoos in relation to certain cultural and social sphere. Demello asserts that a prisoner’s chosen tattoo motifs symbolise or represent the journey the prisoner has taken and can convey where he is from
and what his life situation is like in prison. One of the most important tattoos Demello finds in the prison environment is called *loca*, a tattoo indicating where the prisoner is originally from or gang affiliation. A tattoo can define an individual’s ethnic identity while simultaneously distinguishing the individual from other ethnic groups (Demello, 1993, p. 10f).

Demello also shows how prisoners in an American context distinguish between “convicts” and mere “inmates”. “Convicts” are characterised by not submitting to authority, which “inmates” are perceived as doing. In addition, “convicts” choose to tattoo themselves despite the prison administration’s ban on tattoos (Demello, 1993, p. 12). Demello’s study also shows that there is some restraint among reputable prison tattooists when it comes to tattooing young and new prisoners. This is because tattooists, paradoxically enough, are aware of the stigmatising effects of the tattoos after completing a sentence, when the individual returns to society and tries to find a job, for example. Prison tattoos are recognisable by their less straight and sharp lines because they are often given by hand or with self-made tattoo machines. They are thus discernible from tattoos given in a commercial context (Demello, 1993, p. 10ff).

Furthermore, an important reflection Demello makes is that she views prisoners’ tattoos as a way of covering the body once more after it has been de-identified by police and prison authorities and supplied with a prison uniform, the anonymous overalls (Demello, 1993, p. 13). She sees tattoos as an effort to re-create an identity in a specific environment.

These studies share several points of interest with the context in which Russian/Soviet prisoners find themselves. Above all, this involves the individual’s belonging to a sub-group. The individual chooses to have his or her body inscribed with permanent symbols of loyalty in the form of marks of position and place within the group to which one belongs. The individuals thus reflect their sub-group’s reality, hierarchy and morals on their own bodies, an act of submission that declares them worthy of inclusion in the group and shows that they have made a conscious choice. This must then be re-confirmed through real criminal acts, which are carved into the individual’s body as a reflection of his or her criminal identity and behaviour. The criminal identity is thus under constant construction and reconstruction.

In the context of imprisonment, tattoos are thus a certificate of completed acts, and comprise the criminal’s most important and perhaps only official document.

*The tattoo: evidence and memory*

An individual’s identity can, however, be more complex than comprising a reflection of a sub-group’s reality or a confirmation of his or her own position in such a group. The tattoo’s representative capacity can also contain more aspects than a course of events – prison sentences, criminal acts and entered agreements.

The man in the second photograph has a tattoo of a church dome with towers probably symbolising the number of prison sentences this man has endured, with a cross over each one that was served to term. This tattoo is a document of proof, evidence of his prison time and behind each sentence is a presumed crime. Also, with every identity marker such as the stars, the cat face and the epaulette comes an evidence of loyalty, dedication and status within a given context. These tattoos are not given without cause; there are real events behind the cat face and probably a series of events and agreements. The tattoos are earned and one single tattoo can unveil a long chain of actions in real life. The narrative behind each one of the tattoos is held in darkness, since we only can scratch the surface.

In addition to their value as evidence, tattoos can represent individual memories which the individual potentially may not convey outwardly, but which are present, latent, in this permanent inscription. For example, behind the more official representation of the number of prison sentences conveyed by the church’s cupolas, it is not unthinkable that the individual experience of imprisonment is also present.
Millar (2006) describes the relationship between a document, in her case a photograph, and the emotions and memories it stirs in the person who participated in the event documented by the photograph – something which differs from the emotions and memories the same photograph stirs in someone who did not partake in the event (p. 114f). For Millar, the document itself comprises not a memory, but a starting point for different memories among different individuals. The same also applies for tattoos.

In a commercial tattooing context, it becomes clear that individuals may have various intentions behind the choice of a tattoo motif. Clinton R. Sanders (1988) divides tattoo recipients into five different categories. The first category indicates the tattoo as a symbol of an interpersonal relationship, which can be expressed in choosing the same tattoo motif as a close friend, or getting a tattoo of a partner’s name (p. 222). The second category comprises tattoo motifs representing participation in a group; here, the recipient seeks to demonstrate his or her loyalty to a certain group: an emblem for a motorcycle club or a football team, or perhaps military service (something one does with one’s platoon mates) (Sanders, 1988, p. 222). A third category comprises the intention to represent one’s own primary interests or activities. Sanders says individuals often choose tattoo motifs related to what they primarily dedicate their lives to, or to something they especially enjoy doing. Sanders (1988) gives the example of a rabbit breeder getting a tattoo of a rabbit (p. 222). For the fourth category, Sanders offers self-image, which means the tattoo serves to visually represent the individual’s identity. This could include, for example, getting a tattoo of one’s star sign and thus conveying when in the year one was born (Sanders, 1988, p. 222). The fifth and last of Sanders’ categories is decorative/aesthetic expression, which means choosing a design that is aesthetically pleasing, something one perceives as beautifying the body (Sanders, 1988, p. 223).

In our Russian/Soviet context, we can find examples that appeal to Sanders’ first category, representations of interpersonal relationships, in the remembrance tattoos among lesbian prisoners which represent romantic relationships, a phenomenon Vasiliev has mentioned (FUEL, 2017h). We can find Sanders’ second category in the context of Russian/Soviet prisoners via tattoos in the form of stars, cats and epaulettes, all of which signal group affiliation. Furthermore, the self-image category is discernible in a prisoner’s choice of tattoos that portray him or her as a rebel or as “anti-social”, someone who does not submit to authority except for those recognised by the individual. This category can also be related to Demello’s description above of prisoners’ division into “convicts” and “inmates” where the latter adapt to the rules of the prison. The fifth category, decorative purposes, is potentially difficult to apply to this context, in that Russian/Soviet prisoners’ tattoos can be viewed as more informative in nature. An outside viewer may, however, find them well made and the bearer expects a well-made tattoo by his or her tattooist.

Gender aspects in the practice of tattooing have not been directly in focus in this study, but it is worth noting that the tattoos of female prisoners often reflect a reality permeated by relationships or a sexualised body (for descriptions of tattoos with sexualised content on the female body, see FUEL, 2008, p. 302f). This can be compared with male prisoners’ authoritarian tattoos, which appeal to a position within the criminal hierarchy, number of convictions, and a life dedicated to a certain criminal professional path. Sidorov also points out that female prisoners’ tattoos are often emotional and tend to reflect broken relationships. The tattooed face of a child may be a reminder of the child the woman left outside of prison; a motif with a small child sitting on a flying bird may represent a single mother (Sidorov, 2008b, p. 395). According to Plutser-Sarno (2006), for male prisoners, a clean body with no tattoos is a tabula rasa with no authority, masculinity or identity in that it does not signal any status (p. 49).

Behind the tattoos’ expressed representation is a layer representing the passing of time. Tattoos created in prison may also trigger memories, which Millar acknowledges as the power of the document: these could be memories of scents, people and their stories, regret
and a sense of humiliation. In this context, tattoos as representation comprise a potential life story, where all motifs on a body constitute one of many parts of a built-up document, serving simultaneously as evidence of a life and the memory of a life. In our context, tattoos function as documents coloured by a reality that exists far from the everyday life of the majority society.

Concluding discussion
In this study, we define the tattoo as a composite symbol that represents an identity, recreates that identity and conveys information. In the context studied, tattoos represent for instance groups of people (the profession of “thieves”), status, aspiration and a language of sorts, but also individual memories and real-life events of the persons carrying them. This concluding discussion will try to combine the view of the tattoo as a document of communication, with its inherent informative, social and cultural function within a given context, with the view of the tattoo as evidence and memory intimate related to the individual bearer. This latter aspect will also be discussed in relation to the archive concept. Finally, we would like to stress the importance of a theoretical framework within archival, and library and information studies that includes all types of documents.

The informative, communicative and social role of the tattoo
In the informative, communicative and social role, tattoos are important as documents of power and agency. They do something, they are agents and play a social role in a given context, and they also get their specific meaning in this social context. Here, we follow Smith (1990, 1994), Brown and Duguid (1996) and Frohmann (2004) when they stress the social and instrumental functions of documents.

The informative aspect of the tattoo derives from its ability to speak to its surrounding about who the individual bearer is, and where he or she has been or comes from. The tattoo as a document is inscribed on the individual body as a representation of achievements, leading to a positioning within a distinct social sphere. Thus, the tattoo reflects the individual’s identity based on his or her position in relation to a surrounding context. In the criminal context, the ability of tattoos to represent a course of events by illustrating prison sentences and completed actions of loyalty is of utter importance. With the tattoo a person can communicate his/her submission to and inclusion with a sub-group in the prison environment, and also the hierarchy and moral of this sub-group. The tattoos, thus, give the criminal not only an identity but also a position in the criminal context and hierarchy. In the context of imprisonment, tattoos are thus a certificate of acts and statements, and comprise the criminal’s most important and perhaps only official document.

This document is vital to the inmate. The tattoo may entail a survival strategy that confirms the identity given by society and the criminal hierarchy, becoming the ticket to a world governed by its own laws and career opportunities. In this strongly rule-governed context, there are no contracts or legal texts formulated (in paper); rather, the individual body is the information’s medium. The individual bodies become cogs in a machine where information must flow in order for the regulatory structure to be upheld. Prisoners’ bodies thus exist outside of their individuality and become more than just a body or an identity, they carry documents, i.e., tattoos that communicate vital and essential information of its carrier and the information and document structure of the prison.

Tattoos not only serve as documents in the internal communication but also external. The tattooing practice among Russian/Soviet prisoners can be seen as the deviant’s strategy of shielding himself/herself from the majority society, which has dismissed him/her, and creating his/her own dignity through his/her own system of norms and values. This study connects to a perspective found in previous studies on the significance of tattoos in the construction of “the other”: the criminal, savage and seafarer.
A living archive – the tattoo as evidence and memory of the individual bearer

As a collection of documents displayed on a human body, the tattoos function as an archive of evidence of actions and events as well as memories of those actions and events. The tattoos thus transform the individual body into a biography of events; they are evidence of events and actions that have taken place in the real life of the person carrying them. Since the documents, i.e., the tattoos, are bound to the individual body, the body can be seen as a personal archive, a biography of sorts, or like a personal diary.

The understanding of this both abstract and tangible archive is to be found in the context in which they were created, i.e., among a group of people governed by their own set of laws and practices, but also on the very personal and subjective level of its carrier. This means that with the tattoos, the bearer constructs a self-image that goes hand in hand with constructed ideals within a specific group as well as expresses the individual’s perspectives on his or her own life. Thus, the bearer communicates the meaning constructed socially by the group but also his/her private ideas.

The intrinsic truth of the tattoo always remains, to a high degree, with the individual who also can change, during his or her life path, his or her perspective on why the particular motif was chosen. The events represented by the tattoos may also morph into memories when they no longer serve a function as evidence (much as records in a public archive), in the event that the individual leaves the sphere in which the tattoo’s function as evidence. But in many ways, the tattoo serves as an identity document that one cannot easily leave behind; they are kind of everlasting, or at least long-lasting, evidences. The evidence of prison sentences one bears on one’s body, made apparent by the blurry black lines of prison tattoos, could mean that one is eternally banished to marginalisation if recognised by outsiders. Unlike an “ordinary” document, the tattoo cannot be passed between owners or hidden away. Also, as the bearer of these tattoos, the individual knows what they represent, that they are remnants of an identity one wants to or would never leave behind, or memories of an abandoned identity. (Tattoos can of course be removed, but not as easily as with other documents that you can burn or simply throw away).

The tattoo as a document in archival and library and information studies

The intention behind portraying the tattoo as a document is to highlight its social as well as cultural significance in a given context. This study wants to show the power aspects of documents that have been stressed by, for instance, Dorothy Smith (1990, 1994) in several studies. It also wants to show that different forms of documents can reflect the society and culture in which they were created in shifting manners. Terry Cook (1997) talks about archives as potentially reflecting society as a whole, with all of its inhabitants, groups and mutual interactions (p. 30). This perspective on the possibilities of archives and libraries presumes the inclusion of individual stories. There is knowledge about the human condition to be found within a subculture that posits itself on the outskirts of our societies, a knowledge that should not be discarded or buried. The narratives surrounding the tattoos in a prison environment could provide us with insight into the failures and shortcomings of modern society.

References


The tattoo as a document


Photographs


Websites


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