

Orality, Literacy and Communications

Term Paper:

Comparison of Typewriting and Tattooing

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The focus of this paper will be on the comparison of the typewriter and its finished product to that of a tattoo gun, and the finished product, the tattoo. This is not a common comparison, but there are many similarities between the two. Some of the overlapping similarities that can be seen between the typewriter and tattoo process are that they can both be seen as violent inscriptions that are permanent. This can also aid in memory. Another way that typewriting and tattoos are similar is through the symbolic representation of a breakdown of words into symbolic characters that then again make up the words typewritten on the page. The same can be seen with a tattoo, because the image is broken down into separate lines that then re-build the whole image. Lastly, the theme of the ghost will be discussed in relation to typewriting and tattooing. The essay will rely on Kittler's chapter on the typewriter, Part Six of Wershler-Henry's *Iron Whim*, and a couple of articles on tattooing to further the explanation of the similarities of the typewriter and tattooing mentioned above.

The way that the typewriter functions when marking the page is with force, which can be heard by the person and even others when the typewriter is being used. This can be seen as a violent act on the page, leaving it with a permanent mark. The typewriter is often compared to a machine gun, due not only to the force with which it inscribes on a page, but also due to its speed in which it can do so. This of course is in comparison to handwritten texts and the fact that typists were able to type at greater speeds than handwriting allowed for. Kittler states:

“The typewriter became a discursive machine gun. A technology whose basic action not coincidentally consists of strikes and triggers proceeds in automated and discrete steps, as does ammunitions transport in a revolver and machine gun...”¹ The reference to the striking of the keys, is what connects to a machine gun’s bullet striking a person. The reference of the typewriter in comparison to a machine gun also stems from the time period in which typewriters became popular. Many technological advances such as the typewriter were products of the Civil War.² Also, the finished product something typewritten can be aimed at a certain audience, trying to imprint the information in the text onto the people. For instance “Typewriters are “fast,” like rapid fire weapons...I wanted to attack the whole city.”³ This helps to support why typewriters were so often compared to machine guns, and that they were aiming at an audience to further make the impact of the written word. This can also be seen in Wershler-Henry’s text in reference to Spider Jerusalem who is a fictional journalist. “Jerusalem continually scores “direct hits” on his targets with his writing...”⁴ The theme of the typewriter as a gun aiming at an audience of readers is a large theme, and can be seen in more than one text. However, often times, this aim fails, and does not resonate with the audience as the writer had hoped. In this sense, the typewriter fails.

In the instance of tattooing, an actual gun is involved. The mechanism used to tattoo is referred to as a tattoo gun. In relation to the violent strikes of the typewriter, the tattoo gun violently inscribes the images, or words on the skin of the individual who receives the tattoo. The way in which a tattoo gun inscribes the ink on the skin is with the needle which is moved by

¹ Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, 191

² Kittler *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, 191

³ Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, 192

⁴⁴⁴ Wershler-Henry, *Iron Whim*, 279

a spring coil. Once the gun is turned on, the electromagnetic energy contracts the coil thus moving the needle. “The ink is transferred from the needle to a person’s skin in short, quick bursts as the needle comes out of the gun.”⁵ The relation of the speed in which a tattoo gun acts, can also be compared to the speed of the typewriter. Both function quickly and make their mark. For most, tattooing is seen as a violent act upon which the ink is transferred, and it can be seen why tattoos are often referred to as body modifications. Just as the typewriter modifies the paper in which it marks, the ink from the tattoo gun does the same to the skin. This permanently modifies the body, just as the typewritten word permanently modifies the paper.

Now, to further exemplify how the process of typewriting is similar to the process of tattooing the theme of permanence will be addressed. Handwritten documents are not as solidified in permanence as those typed or printed through a typewriter. Once something is typed, if a mistake is made, it cannot be erased, the mistake either has to be crossed out or white-out must be applied, but even then, the original mistake can most often be seen. “The typewriter tears writing from the essential realm of the hand i.e., the realm of the word. The word itself turns into something “typed.” Where typewriting on the contrary, is only a transcription and serves to preserve the writing...”⁶ The idea then, is that the typewriter is utilized to ensure the permanence of a text. The typewriter keeps the text around and preserves it.

The relationship of the permanence of typewriting and its preservation of words can then be deemed as similar to the permanence of tattoos. Tattoos are permanent marks on the body and for many who are tattoo enthusiasts the permanence of the tattoo is the main

⁵ Best Tattoo Supplies, *How a Tattoo Machine Gun Works*

⁶ Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, 198

attraction to it. For instance, “Becoming tattooed can be seen as a form of a permanent diary that no one can take away.”⁷ The reason as to why many people get tattooed is because they want that permanent reminder of a life event or the reminder of someone that they once knew that was important to them. Until recently once one got a tattoo they were stuck with it for life, with the invention of laser removal, this is not necessarily always the case. Although there is laser removal, a scar is normally left over, so there is still something left over from the tattoo, even though it is not the image itself. This also relates to the idea of the permanent mark of the typewriter and that when one makes a mistake it is still noticeable even though they have tried to correct it. Just as the typewriter preserves the permanence of word, the tattoo aims to do the same with the image marked on the skin.

The next theme which ties into the essay is that of memory aids and the ghost which is leftover from typewritten documents. Although some may argue that the handwritten documents do the same, this is not necessarily so. It more likely gain access to something which is typewritten or printed in some manner than it is to a handwritten original document. The typewriter, just as any text leaves behind a ghost writer, but the discovery of this ghost writer is more likely with the use of a typewriter. Although an author may be long gone, their typewritten contribution is still in existence. Every time someone reads that text, the author is brought back from the past into the present Kittler states: “Fundamentally, the typewriter is nothing but a miniature printing press.”⁸ This helps to point out that although the typewriter does not necessarily allow for mass production of a text, it does leave behind the memory of

⁷ Oksanen, and Turtiainen, *A Life Told in Ink*, 3

⁸ Kittler, *The Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, 228

the author, and his or her voice. The typewriter, as discussed before allows for a sort of permanence and preserves the text.

Tattoos can also serve as an aid in memory, or reminders for the individual who has them. When someone looks at a tattoo, the question often asked is why do you have that or what does it mean? In the recalling of this, the individual with the tattoo is taken back to the time, place and memory of that specific tattoo. The story telling aspect of tattoos often spark memories that could have been lost at some point. Portrait or memorial tattoos often honor people or things of the past. This aids in the memory of those who once existed, and as reminders of events of the past that have also occurred. In reference to tattoos: "Tattoos function as points of reference or maps that enable life stories to be told... A tattoo engraved into the skin represents a link to personal life history..."⁹ This exemplifies exactly how tattoos allow for reference points in a person's life, in images or words, allowing for the map of personal history. In some ways, this can also be considered a ghost of the past, coming to life whenever the tattoo is viewed or reflected on. Typewriting and tattoos allow for the memory of the past, and brings past ghosts alive when read or reflected upon.

The last theme which I would like to touch on is that of symbols in reference to typewriting. The typewriter breaks down the whole word into symbols and characters. For instance, if one looks at a keyboard of a typewriter, each letter and symbol for the most part has its own key. This then is the physical breakdown of words into symbolic representations of letters. As the typewriter keys are struck, and each letter begins to come together on the page, words are produced. This process is unifying in that it builds the language which was originally

⁹ Oksanen, and Turtiainen, *A Life Told in Ink*, 2

broken down back up. Once those keys imprint on the paper in a unifying way, words are created. As the production of words increases, the whole of the text starts to come together to produce a more concrete document. After this process has been finished, the text has been completed, and now is ready to be read and shared with others, if the author wishes to do so. The use of the typewriter allows for the breakdown of words, into the symbols which are the letters, and then builds the words back up once it has inscribed on the page.

The breakdown of images or even characters can be seen in the process of tattooing. The first step in the process of tattooing is applying the stencil to the skin. Although the stencil is often of the whole image, there are certain aspects of the tattoo that are left out in this process, such as shading or the lines that are going to be free-handed. Each stroke of the needle on the skin breaks down the whole of the image in lines. As the lines begin to be connected, through the ink coming from the needle, the image starts to fully take on the shape of the stencil. Then the shading is applied, which is often done by free-hand, and then the image is completed. Just as the typewriter breaks down words and then builds them back up, tattooing acts in the same way, but instead with images.

The topic of typewriting and tattoos stemmed from my own interest in tattoos themselves. Each of the themes discussed in this essay are things that I have personally experienced both in typewriting and being tattooed. First to address the theme of violent force in which the typewriter and tattoo gun act. The very first thing that I noticed and struggled with in typewriting was that of striking the keys with enough force, to actually mark on the page. This is most likely a rookie mistake, in that most people nowadays are used to typing on a computer keyboard which does not require nearly as much force as the typewriter does. Now

that I have had some more experience with the typewriter I have enjoyed pressing heavily on the keys making each mark with force, and am satisfied by the sound made by doing so. In reference to the tattoo gun, although it is very fast, it is also very forceful. The sensory experience receiving a tattoo is an interesting one. Just as one has to strike down on the keys of the typewriter to leave a mark, the tattoo artist, has to also apply pressure when tattooing in order to make the mark on the skin.

Next, to reflect on the theme of permanence in both typewriting and tattooing as it is important in both. Another frustration that I have experienced with the typewriter is that once a mistake is made, it can be difficult to cover up. This lends to the permanence of the mark made when using a typewriter. Even when one tries to cover a mistake, it can still be noticeable. This made me put more thought into what I wanted to say in what I was typing because I did not want to make a mistake and start all over again. The same goes for tattooing, it is permanent and it is hard to cover up mistakes, or even remove a tattoo. Even though tattoo removal exists, it often takes at least three visits to fully remove the tattoo, and even then, a scar can be left over. For most people who are serious about tattoos, including myself, part of their draw is their permanence. The permanence of the tattoo can be scary for some, but if well thought out, a tattoo is often something that one is proud of, and when discussed serves as a memory aid, or as the quote from the article stated, serves as a map of personal history. The idea of the ghost which is left behind in both typewriting and tattooing is very intriguing for me. I love the idea that when I read a text or have even typewritten something myself, that there is a part of me left behind for someone to discover. And if that writing is discovered and read, then the author is brought back into the present. The same can be said of

tattoos. Every time I reflect or look at one of my tattoos the ghost of my past is brought back to life, and I can recall why I got that tattoo, and what it meant to me at the time I got it. The connection of typewriting and tattooing is one that I have never pondered before this class, and it was interesting to make the connections of the two throughout this essay. The themes which I discussed are themes which have come up several times in class, and I thought that they exemplified the relationship between typewriting and tattooing most strongly.

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