

Thinking the Self through Hooks, Needles, and Scalpels

Body Suspensions, Tattoos, and other Body
Modifications

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Abstract

Body modifications such as tattoo, scarification and body suspension represent not only aesthetic interventions, they can also be social practices with which to challenge and transcend the body's limits, operating on the perception of wellbeing and moulding specific forms of self. In this Research Article, based on research on body suspension in Europe, I aim to analyse body modifications as a means to voluntarily intervene in human perceptive abilities, shaping individual lives through unconventional sensory experiences. In these practices, pain is signified as a threshold for sensory turmoil, capable of shaping the protagonists into a 'sensory poiesis'. Through such sensory experiences the individual embarks on a process of 'self-design' to achieve a better state of being, combining suspensions with other body modification techniques. Suspension practitioners act on the flesh and skin with hooks, scalpel, and ink in order to process events, to trigger new versions of the self, and to enhance how they feel. In doing so, they produce unique and original 'projects of humanity', that is, new forms of humanity created by the individuals themselves.

Keywords

Body suspension, Sensory poiesis, Trance, Enhancement, Pain.

I become the person who I am in part because of the things I've done, especially suspensions. Suspensions made me the man I'm today. I wasn't the same person 10 years ago, and for the better. It's not only the act of suspending but also about the people, the connection you made. Just something simple as holding your rope, that's a direct connection with every feeling they have and your own feelings (Mike, piercer, July 2018).¹

This Research Article aims to explore the relationships between body suspensions and other bodily interventions, namely tattoos, scarification, and remotion of body parts, showing how different experiences of flesh manipulation operate in projects of self-construction. Besides being recreative or decorative actions, body modifications can be embraced as explicit plans of self-making, revealing the participants' long-term aims to construct their idea of personhood. Although body-marks are realised on the skin, they go much deeper; the individual operates on the self in great part thanks to the engagement of others and in virtue of the emotional labour involved in the body manipulation process.

Anthropologists have extensively investigated body modification as part of rites of passage (see e.g., the works of Pitt-Rivers 1989; Turner 2001). In particular, these studies have focused on the social meaning of bodily marks. Of particular relevance is the work of Terence Turner (1980), who worked in the Amazonian Forest with communities that decorate their body with feathers and that engage in bodypainting practices. In this context, he suggested a reading of the surface of the body as the symbolic stage upon which the drama of socialisation can be enacted. Following from Turner, bodily adornment in all cultural forms, from bodypainting to clothing, and from feather headdresses to cosmetic surgery, becomes the language through which the self is constituted in the encounter with the social group, while the skin is the social stage where this gathering is performed. In contrast, some researchers have focused on the meaning of this practice in modern societies. I would argue that Bryan Turner (2000), for example, reduced Western tattoo practices to purely decorative purposes, and in doing so underestimates the meanings of the making process. Other authors have explored the symbolic meanings of European and North American body-marks, which have been analysed in the literature as strategies for participants to process life changes (De Mello 2000; Trosman 2013). For instance, in his work on tattoos, Le Breton (2005) argued that the practitioner may connect bodily marks with selected experiences perceived as most relevant in the definition of their life's trajectory (Le Breton 2005). When the individual perceives that she/he is living through an exceptional event that is shaping her/his life path (such as the end of a relationship

1 Interviews were conducted in Italian, Portuguese, Spanish and English. All quotes have been translated by the author other than in English. Interviewees and I discussed anonymity, and I respected their decision when they refused the option and their desire for dialogue with non-practitioners.

or the beginning of a new job), she/he may feel the need to mark or celebrate the transformation. In his work on tattoos among young Portuguese, Sergio Ferreira (2011, 137) focused on the discomfort and sense of loss that individuals coming of age may feel, referring to it as an 'impasse' that underlines the need to move over and take back the control over the self. A tattoo can be the means to react and to move out of the stalemate, he argues, reconfiguring the idea individuals have of themselves through the manipulation of their own flesh. Similarly, sociologist Anthony Giddens (1991) has analysed dreadlocks as an expression of 'crisis' in an individual's life. He suggests that we live in a 'liquid society' (see Bauman 1995) defined by an understanding of the individual as responsible for self-definition. I would add that tattooing can become a strategy to stabilise and indeed define the self, not only to break a deadlock, rather to think a new transformed self.

Inspired by a constructionist approach, this article contributes to a body of literature that has investigated identity and how it is shaped through body modifications and their sensory effects (Howes 1991; Pink 2015). My analysis focuses on the practice of modification and the role of pain and one's perceptual abilities in the process and its transformative outcome. Morinis (1985) has described pain in rites of passage as a 'peak experience' with the potential to mark the memory of the individual carrying out the practice of body modification. In his exploration of funeral tattoos in contemporary urban Canada, Davidson (2017) has similarly analysed the sensation caused by the use of needles to apply the ink on the skin as a cathartic experience, while Le Breton (1995) has argued that the practice of self-harming can constitute desperate attempts on the part of the person to survive existential suffering. However, contributions to this field of study have rarely addressed pain beyond a perspective that frames it as destructive and detrimental. This, I argue, is exemplar of Han's (2021) analyses of pain as a modern taboo. In my research, I am interested in understanding how participants interpret pain during modification experiences, particularly through the example of the practice of suspension. The ethnographic data collected indicate that the participant may ascribe pain with symbolic meaning, correlating it with an improved self-esteem, which results from the success of an imposed self-challenge (e.g., the completion of a body suspension or the fulfilment of a tattoo). Furthermore, for my research participants, pain appears to subvert ordinary sensory function, offering the individual the possibility to feel (and to be) in unexpected and exceptional states of being. Seen from their perspective, the experienced pain is only one of the components of the suspension experience. Once they have learned to master it, the protagonists of my ethnography report achieving the 'bliss' of new states of being.

Tattoo-based practices have received greatest attention in the literature, whilst other body intervention techniques have only received marginal research interest (Pitts 2003). Pitt's work is exemplar of this limited body of literature on other body modifications such as piercings, implants, and pullings (see also Myers 1992; Kosut 2010). Body suspensions—the practice of hanging the human body from implements attached to the skin through temporary perforations—have received attention from a scarce number of studies, with a particular focus on the context of Europe (Liotard 2015; Kowal 2016). Liotard's work considers a suspension show in France, portraying the tension between suspendee and audience. Kowal's (2016) ethnography considered suspension practices in nightclubs and tattoo-festivals in Poland, mainly performed by male university students. She notes that these practices are often stigmatised by non-suspendees because they are associated with the consumption of cannabis, alcohol, and other drugs. Suspendees, she adds, are thus seen as emotionally unbalanced, self-destructive and 'monsters' (Kowal 2016, 82). In contrast, in her analysis, suspensions become escapes from the social constraints affecting these individuals. So far, the voices of those who practice have not often been included in studies about these bodily techniques, when not misrepresented. Practitioners have been framed as deviant or fragile narcissists, making a connection between voluntary self-imposed forms of pain and psychological misconduct (Forsyth and Simpson 2008; Camps et al. 2015). These authors have projected cultural meanings about pain in their analysis, giving for granted that the study of a pain experience is index of insanity. As Han's (2021) recent work on pain as a taboo has highlighted, there is no cultural space in Western societies to authorise a constructivist and positive use of pain, at least not one concerning body suspension (see also Manfredi and Nardini 2022). Such 'pathologising' scientific literature about body modifications is biased by the vision of pain as something negative, and does not only assume a position of medical normativity, it also creates the correspondence between body modification and a biomedical deficit. Going beyond moral judgement and pathologisation, in this article I explore the strategy of 'thinking the self' and the goal of regeneration as experienced by European practitioners who have adopted a range of body modification techniques². I will bring forward my argument by analysing ethnographical data on suspension as experienced by practitioners, without making the assumption that the experience of submitting oneself to a voluntary form of pain corresponds with an implicit motivation for self-harm. To do so, I draw on the 'anthropo-poiesis' perspective developed by Francesco Remotti (1996). Remotti defines 'anthropo-poiesis' as the cultural process of human production that

2 The ethnography on which this article is based explored suspensions in the context of Europe (with focus on Italy, Norway and Portugal), and investigated how suspensions are defined and narrated in relation to 'traditional' practices. Body suspensions have historically been part of rites of passage in different cultures in North-Central America (Liberty 1980; Comba 2001) and Asia (MacLeod 1931; Younger 2022; Racine 2016). Research participants referred to Natives Americans as their main historical and cultural reference. However, they also expressed awareness of the substantial differences between their practice with hooks and ropes from their 'original' contexts.

takes place for example through rites of initiation and that mould young individuals into complete human beings. I extend this proposal to the analysis of individual projects of self-production involving a planned alteration of the senses. In other words, I argue for an attention to body interventions as a means to operate on how the self is perceived and produced, with a potential to subvert the body's limits and inducing altered states of consciousness.

In the past, anthropologists have tried to solve the historical Cartesian division in understanding body and mind, in order to regain a wider approach on human experience. One prominent body of literature that has attempted this rupture is the embodiment paradigm (Csordas 1990), inspired by phenomenological philosophy. Thomas Csordas (1990) (and others after him) suggested that the body is the main device of perception of the world, incorporating knowledge about the world and producing new knowledge about it in doing so. Hence, there is not a mind separated from the body: perception and being-in-the-world are realised through the entire body. In contrast with this understanding of human experience, when investigating narratives on body modifications and suspensions, the separation between body and mind is actually expressed as important by my research participants in conceptualising their experience. In stressing the division between mind and body, I argue, these practitioners underline the disarticulation of self-perception. Self-perception is a condition where the phenomenological unity (Merleau-Ponty 1945) is voluntarily put in crises by practitioners (as it is with suspension) in order to trigger a trance-like state. The suspension and the trance correspond with an alteration of the self-perception, but they also leave a deep sense of energy and satisfaction. In what follows I will argue that by the time the suspension ends, the experience has restored the chaos, after having disarticulated the self, allowing its different components to be conceived of as in harmony again. The body is not only conceived of as an open 'site of construction', as Orbach (2009) has suggested based on years of practice as a psychoanalyst. Rather, in the suspension technique, the body becomes part of the experience of being, even when it is dualistically narrated as a canvas to operate on the self. Body and mind phenomenologically embody the trance through the suspension, as well as the regenerative effects of the altered state of perception.

This Research Article examines body modifications as explicit reflexive projects of individuals seeking specific 'forms of humanity' (Remotti 2002). In his work on anthropo-poiesis, Remotti (2002) suggests that in producing embodied values, cultures shape members of societies, including in what concerns their flesh and ways to think themselves: for instance, a rite of initiation provides a body with a new shape (such as with circumcision) as well the idea of maturity for the protagonist, resulting in a specific form of humanity. In studying body modifications, I understand the self to be what a person is able to see, to wish and to feel in

reference to him or herself. I follow a constructivist approach, in which the process of individual self-production is characterised by self-awareness and is culturally constituted (Mead 1934). Further, this approach assumes that human beings are culturally 'produced' on a daily basis and especially on occasions of rites of passage, such as those that mark the transition from childhood to adulthood (e.g., Geertz 1998). The 'form of humanity' (Remotti 2002), then, is achieved by following pre-existing instructions traditionally provided by the parent's generation, or inventing new ones. As I will demonstrate in what follows, the latter is the case of European suspensions. Novel self-making processes require legitimation, as they explicitly deviate from established cultural norms. Such legitimation is achieved by making use of other sources of validation (such as symbolic meanings provided by the suspension community). This raises the following questions: why, then, do practitioners adopt body modifications to produce themselves? What aspects of body modification succeed in solving the needs of participants for self-design?

The article is based on the doctoral research project titled *Learning to Fly. A Trans-spatial Ethnography on Body Suspensions in Europe*. I develop my analysis based on three selected ethnographic episodes, with the aim of showing how pain modifies the experience of being in the world (Merleau-Ponty 1945) for research participants, and it is signified as a constitutive part of the process of constructing a new 'true' self. I argue that the meanings associated with pain and body interventions by the three protagonists, Paolo, José, and Maria, have allowed them to re-think who they are, and how they relate with others and with the environment, in that they associate the actions directed to their flesh and their skin with a regenerative effect.

In the participants' narratives of tattoos, scarification, nullifications, and suspensions, we will see understandings of the body having direct correspondence with the self transpire. Shillings (1993) argues that, in modern societies, the body is an explicit project of the individual, who is responsible for it. In my data, narratives on body modifications illustrate the will of practitioners to intervene on who they are, specifically concerning the process of personal experiences (as in the case of José), the production of a desired version of self (as for Paolo) and the desire to trigger new perspectives (as it happens with Maria). As we will see in these three vignettes, a specific goal is not anchored to a pre-determined technique of modification, nor do single purposes exclude multiple valences. The three stories demonstrate that the body is a privileged point of access to the self, and it can become a means to manipulate 'what we are' and 'what we want to be'. It is in this context, that pain can be understood as a tool with which to explore new sensory attachments and experiences of being in the world. Pain for these three practitioners is certainly more than the evidence of destructive purposes and self-harm, it is part of a project of self (re)production.

Fieldwork and methods³

A suspension consists on the elevation of a person through the use of metal hooks temporarily inserted piercing the superficial layer of the skin. Hooks in turn are connected to ropes that pass through scaffolding erected over the suspension participant (or suspendee). By pulling on the main rope engaged through the scaffolding (a move normally performed by another individual), the suspendees' body is raised into the air, and may hang there, suspended, for as long as the individual may desire.

My research focuses on the meanings related to the practice of suspension. Practitioners periodically gather in Europe, primarily during festivals dedicated to the practice of suspension—accounting for up to one hundred participants—or daily meetings, with three to five attendees. In a multi-sited approach involving a net of fieldworks (Wulff 2002), ethnographic data indicate the existence of a suspension community producing cultural content, behaviour, and values that circulate across physical borders and online spaces. Because of this, an online ethnography imposed itself as an expanded fieldwork (Baker 2013) and it motivated a 'trans-spatial' approach to research that focused on the motion of meanings through moments of socialisation of the practice, rather than using a single space as a unit of analysis.

The qualitative research methodology involved semi-structured interviews, realised on a sample of 58 interviewees (equally gender representative) aged between 23 and 55 years. Suspendees' often practice other body modifications besides suspension, after the first instance of it or—more often—before it. Suspensions are hence inserted in life paths characterised by familiarity with body manipulation and the sensory experiences involved in the use of needles, scalpels, solar branding tools and so on. For these individuals, these bodily marks are connected to a unique life trajectory and, at the same time, they visually express a lifelong commitment to body modifications. Furthermore, suspensions relate to other acts of self-care (such as meditation, sportive training, periodical or permanent abstinence from alcohol, drugs or meat eating), indicating a signification of the practice of suspension in a wider projectuality of the self through different acts of body-centred experiences and strategies of self-definition.

In contrast to the interviewees' experiences, the ethnographer's skin was openly shared as untattooed or scarified throughout fieldwork. Even if not as a suspendee, I engaged my body in the knowledge creation process. To do so, I embraced the research practice as an embodied, emplaced, and multi-sensory experience,

3 The images included in this article were taken during fieldwork and have been shared according to the informed consent of research participants.

following a phenomenological approach (Csordas 1990; Stoller 1997; Ingold 2000; Pink 2015). I engaged my whole person in each interaction with my interlocutors or observations of suspension practices, becoming aware of the sensory gate that the body constitutes in the perception of the environment, both social and physical, and remaining mindful of its role in the co-construction of the ethnographical knowledge in the intersubjective encounters with others (Viegas and Mapril 2012).

Throughout the research period, I was educated by my interlocutors about how to attend suspensions as a member of the group, for instance, performing meaningful emphatic silences or making eye contact during the insertion of hooks or after the participant was lowered to the floor. I progressively learned to emotionally support suspendees, using my body to properly perform in the group, and understood it to be an emotional(ly) based community (Maffesoli 1996; Rosenwein 2006).

During interviews and participant observation, talking about suspensions rarely appeared as the most suitable way to communicate. Therefore, to overcome the perceived limitations of logo-centric expression, I went about creating metaphorical representations, primarily through handcrafts, so that participants could express suspensions beyond (or not only with) logo-centric narratives. The creative laboratory I designed and carried out for this purpose was joined by 27 interviewees, enriching interviews and data based on participant observation with multi-sensory working sessions (Manfredi 2021). These were characterised by the manipulation of liquids, sand and paper, colourful creations on sheet and canvas, video-shooting and editing, or performances involving balloons, songs, and night fires (which often involved the burning of some of the works previously crafted) on the beach (see Fig. 1). Participants used handcrafts as referents of oral expression, enhancing words through the use and making of objects, and opening up our interactions to unexpected topics both with the ethnographer and the other session participants.



Figure 1. Beach fire in the same spot where a participant had been suspended a few hours earlier. The destruction of the drawing was a symbolic act to highlight the ephemeral sensation of the practice. Picture courtesy of Tor, research participant. Tuscany, 2017.

The data collected indicate that the meaning given to suspension and its effect on the participants' lives is often delegitimised by those outside of the suspension community. In contrast to suspensions that are performed within traditional contexts, where suspensions are shared and sanctioned by the group (Liberty 1980; Comba 2001; MacLeod 1931; Racine 2016; Younger 2002), suspensions in the context of Europe may instead be perceived as destructive behaviour by outsiders, as Nadeje, a photographer noted in an interview conducted in September 2017: 'People tell us we are mad and suspensions hurt. No, it's about you focusing on pain or not. And they choose to ignore all the rest just to look at pain'. Nadeje's description points to a certain desire of participants to see their practice recognised by others. Suspension practitioners feel misunderstood, as they view pain as being only one of the components of the practice and not the goal.

As I noted above, I have employed a trans-spatial perspective in carrying out this ethnography of suspension practices, that is, I make use of a complementary approach of online and offline fieldwork to observe the (re)production of social values, feelings and expressions across online and offline spaces. For instance, participants often also expressed this notion that their interest in suspensions is

not accepted by the wider society have as graphic jokes in the Facebook group called *Body Suspension*. Here, graphic vignettes represent suspendees as warriors who metaphorically fight against the prejudice of outsiders.

The lack of shared meaning between suspendees and wider society in regards to this body-centred practice often prevents practitioners from being open about their practice in other contexts of their social life. They report episodes of social exclusion and discrimination based on the voluntary pain they experienced in suspensions. Outside of the body suspension community, suspension is often a little known practice and when it is, the level of pain associated with it is generally overestimated. As Helena (a nurse and suspension practitioner) expressed it in an interview in May 2016: 'When people look at suspension pictures on the Internet, they are shocked. Actually the good energy that comes from the practice is not represented and so it's hard to get more people into it'. This article invites the reader to unfold 'the good energy', as Helena puts it, and to explore all the rest that suspendees' experience beyond the pain caused by the hook pierced on the skin and in connection with other sensory experiences involved in the sensation of pain. As we will see, in the following ethnographic cases, such manipulation of the flesh reveals other memories, experiences, and social relations, and fixes them on the skin, promoting original (and mandatory) projects of humanity through the alteration of bodily sensory abilities.

Paolo and the mole

During suspension festivals, I often had the chance to join a person sitting on the sidelines of the suspension scaffolding, themselves observing someone being suspended. On one of these occasions, I met Paolo, an Italian student in his early 30s. He had travelled for hours by train and car to experience his first suspension.

I want to see what it is, if it is as fantastic as it seems to be. I am very open, and I don't know if I will be able to be on air, but I want to try. I already saw many people suspending and I know it can be very different for everyone. People told me that a suspension is never like any other one. I am not worried by the pain ... I already have some tattoos, so I know that pain is part of the deal (Field note, June 2019).

Paolo was facing a challenge. To him the suspension was an unknown experience narrated by him as a leap of faith. First experiences with body suspension are characterised by a dimension of exploration and discovery. Being a new experience, the beginner will not know what to expect, and their narration of it often ascribes this experience a notion of uniqueness. As we sat on the floor, Paolo noted that he had 'an open mind' for what was going to happen. He said he wanted to avoid having high expectations in case these might limit his experience of his

own suspension. He observed that he had contemplated the chance of failure, but said that he also felt somehow prepared for the risk of pain: he recollected the memory of pain experienced with his tattoos, which had prepared him for the suspension.

In a similar way to the narrative of extreme sports, such as bungee jumping or parachuting (Ferrero Camoletto 2005), first experiences of suspension can be interpreted as a kind of personal challenge mixed with a sense of curiosity that the individual wishes to satisfy. However, suspensions seem to acquire more articulated meanings, becoming strategies to mould the self and to produce a specific form of humanity through the act of sensory manipulation involved in this bodily practice. As many of my interlocutors suggested, once people have experienced it, they can decide if it was a once in a lifetime experience or if they want to repeat it. The progression is very personal, as is the time suspendees feel appropriate to pass between one experience and the next: the body needs to recover from one suspension experience to maximise the amount of time one is able to remain suspended in the air next; otherwise the suspension will fail.

Experienced practitioners often narrate how suspensions never lose their element of personal exploration. Paolo, for instance, is a novice. As such, he has been told by practitioners (presumably more seasoned than him) that ‘a suspension is never like another one’. However, the main goal is not the continual search for the new in these sensations. In other words, the interest in newness goes offstage as it were after the first hooks. Through the first instances of the practice of these bodily modifications, and by progressively becoming familiar with the community of practitioners, the suspension⁴ acquires a social framework for the beginner suspendee in the form of emotional support provided by the suspension community. In this way, the suspension becomes a way to bond with other suspendees attending a meeting, whilst being suspended by a shared scaffolding (in this case, suspensions are called ‘in tandem’). In addition, senior practitioners teach novices that the suspension can also become a moment of concentration and intimate personal exploration, during which the individual focuses on sensations described by participants as ‘out of the ordinary’. The suspension’s use thus transforms to elaborate on specific life’s episodes, to provoke changes of perspective, and to construct the ability to dominate and use the pain involved in the practice for new goals. In other words, the pain is not the goal of the practice, rather it is signified as a mandatory passage to trigger an altered state of consciousness that allows a regeneration of the protagonist.

4 The relational valence of suspensions, the body suspension community, and its role in the elaboration of meanings related to the practice, are crucial knots of research outside the scope of this article (Manfredi 2016).

During an interview with Paolo at the suspension festival, he described in detail a set of tattoos on his body; one of them represented Mole Antonelliana, the tower of Turin (in the northwest of Italy):

This tattoo is one of three, which are all connected, and they tell a story. This is the last one I had done, when I decided to become a bone-marrow donor. I started by donating my blood [he points to another tattoo on his leg]. Later I went through other medical procedures [he points out a third tattoo on his forearm] and then I found out that the blood was sent to Turin [he touches the tattoo with the Mole on his biceps]. So these tattoos are all connected and they tell the story of what happened. ... Actually they are my favourite tattoos. I had always desired to donate my bone-marrow and I'm happy that I did, finally. I know it helped a little girl in Turin and so it's fantastic. I think that my tattoos also remind me that I can make a difference ... It's something to not forget (Interview with Paolo, June 2019).

Tattoos remind participants of experiences, of 'something to not forget'. But not only, tattoos are often done to celebrate life's episodes perceived by the participant as extraordinary, as is the case of Paolo's bone marrow donation, and is similarly expressed by other interviewees, or are akin to modern rites of passage. In her work on contemporary marriages in French society, Martine Segalen (2002) illustrates that rites of passage did not disappear in Western urban contexts, rather they transformed. I argue that the aesthetic expression of taste in tattoos is combined with references to life experiences and the desire for transformation in relation to these events. In this sense, body modifications go beyond aesthetics and the will to decorate the body. Suspensions, tattoos and scarifications can be performed to celebrate or memorialise important life events too, such as births, endings or beginnings of romantic relationships, or deaths (Manfredi 2022). Besides the commemoration of a life-event, interviewees indeed underline that the practice gives them the occasion to process the emotions related to it, and to focus on how a particular experience had an impact on their life, contributing to who they have become. Paolo, for instance, shared more on his view of the importance of these bodily marks to him whilst we were having coffee: 'These [tattoo] marks tell my story, the person who I am, as the scars left by the hooks will do. I am the one who faced his fears and got the hooks' (Field note, June 2019).

Body-marks compose an 'autobiographical map', as Trosman (2013) has called it; however, the canvas does not only contain a narrative, rather it shapes it as well: body interventions are sites of discourse too, understood as a practice that systematically shapes the objects being narrated (Foucault 1985). In this sense, the traces created on the skin are both producers of experience and constructors of reality. The discourse not only verbally represents the experience, but it also

moulds it, grounding it in the world and solidifying a specific way of being; 'the person who I am', in Paolo's words. For him, the hook-practice merges with the tattoo's purpose because through them, the individual moulds a specific project of being himself or herself, characterised by the experiences connected to the body-marks. In the case of Paolo's tattoos, the drawings serve to remind him of an altruistic action that took place in his life. I perceive this as an intimate desire on the part of Paolo to be defined by that action. Similarly, the brave attitude (the one necessary to be hung by hooks in a suspension) is an original and precious aspect of the character that Paolo wants to be defined by ('I am the one who faced his fears and got the hooks').

Paolo's tattoo is a reaction to something that occurred during his lifespan, an *extraordinary* experience that interrupted the course of everyday life. The tattoo on Paolo's skin could be understood as an expression of the individual wanting to counteract the obliviousness of time. Through the actions of the tattoo artist, the individual represents their own biography, engraving and highlighting an event of their choosing (rather than any other), which they understand to be a crucial moment in their life. Without the tattoo, the event would probably be lost (in the past of their everyday life), and symbolically be on the same level of importance as others with no existential meaning. In this sense, Paolo's body-marks are strategies of self-definition and self-making through a specific selection of moments elected to form the pillar of their identity. Whilst tattoos order (and create) the present in reference to the past (Manfredi 2022), suspension meanings hold the potential to indicate a connection with projects of the self in the future: the individual leaps into an unexplored situation, an experience that is expected to destabilise the ordinary self. The suspension can thus turn into a tool of self-design, as the meeting with José I describe in the next section will demonstrate. Rather than the desire to be anchored, the practice of suspension aims to dismantle the very self that the series of tattoos was meant to stabilise.

José and his belly-button

I met José, a music teacher and suspension practitioner, in 2017 through a Facebook group where people interested in body suspensions gather and exchange questions, experience, pictures, and news online. I started to exchange private messages with him on the social media platform, and we met in person for the first time in May 2018, on the occasion of an open-air suspension that took place in Portugal. When we met, he defined himself as someone 'relatively unexperienced in body suspension', because he had only practiced it three times. When we both attended a popular suspension festival in Norway almost a year later, he was close to his twentieth suspension.

Like Paolo, José narrates his enthusiasm for the practice in reference to a personal curiosity for the exploration of the body's sensations and emotions that the practice provides, and that he had never experienced through other means. At the time when he discovered suspensions, he told me, he found a passion for other body modification practices, starting by tattooing his foot in a project involving several tattooing sessions and multiple layers of colour. In an email exchange in the autumn of 2017, shortly after we had first met online, José shared that:

People say feet are very painful to tattoo, but pain is just a state of the mind: you can control it. I discovered I was enjoying my body's sensations and that experience gave me so much ... I mean, not only the pain itself but what comes after it! Of course it hurts, but there is so much more beyond pain. I found a dimension of being, as after a suspension, and when it finishes I am a different person, I'm regenerated and stronger.

José expresses the exploration of a sensorial liminality positively, and will repeat the experience if he so desires. Suspensions are generally the result of a life-path of other body modifications (Pitts 2003), but they can also be the starting step. According to José, tattoos, piercings, and scarification involve different forms of pain: sometimes pain is interpreted as a limit to be challenged, that offers regenerative results, whilst other times they present an occasion to feel sensations out of the ordinary, finding unexpected and positive 'dimensions of being' in doing so.

Another episode that José related sheds light on the role of other people in helping participants reach a trance-like state. In March 2019, he showed me a scarification that embraced the whole of his back. It had resulted, he explained to me, from his participation in a work-group of professional practitioners that had taken place during a convention of body modifications. Several hands simultaneously cut his skin to hold the hooks in a way that would create a dragon design, he recounted, tracing each line at least three times. José described the scarification as a bonding relational experience:

It was fantastic to have so many incredible artists with their hands on me, creating something unique all together. Some of them were already good friends but after that, I felt we had created a connection that will be there forever. I am very grateful for what they did (Interview with José, March 2019).

The suspension and the collective cutting of the skin revealed for José a new relationship with his body, one founded on the possibility to experiment through it and to feel interesting sensations in doing so. The intervention on the body not only crystallises a life's episode which forms part in the self-project, as Paolo pointed out, but it can also symbolise the celebration of a meeting, or a novel form

of relationship with a person or a group. Jose's scarification created a bond, an intimate connection with the scarification artists that participated in and facilitated his suspension experience, a finding which supports data I collected on facilitators (professionals assisting suspensions). The modification experience can have effects on the relationships formed by attendees (including suspendees, facilitators, and audience members), enhancing a form of intimacy facilitated by a mutual engagement in the practice and the sharing of an experience characterised by emotions and sensations often described as 'exceptional' by attendees alike (regardless of their role in the suspension practice).

The way the person perceives himself or herself is consequentially empowered through suspension practices. José calls this process a 'regeneration', not only because of the resistance to pain, but also because of the way it enables him to bond with others through experiencing such extra-ordinary sensations. By altering the suspendees' perceptual abilities, the senses can be experienced in a different way. Adis Tahhan (2014) coined the neologism 'skinship' to describe the intimacy constructed between parents and children in Japan through physical contact, such as that which occurs during co-sleeping, co-bathing or baby-wrapping. I argue that suspensions and scarification can also be observed as a form of skinship: over multiple suspension experiences, suspendees create a form of intimacy with other members of the community, in which the sense of touch is narrated as a bonding sensory experience. However, it would be misleading to portray touch as having a higher hierarchy than the other senses in the experience of suspension: skinship is a means to connect and narrate the relationships being formed between suspendee and the other participants in the process of suspension. This, I argue, is a form of embodied intimacy that is based on a sense of community in which the entire body is involved in the experience. In his work on the anthropology of senses, Howes (2013, 8) suggests that perception requires 'intersensoriality', that is, that the senses are interconnected in multiple ways. For instance, someone whispering near the ear of another person while they are receiving hooks can be experienced as another way of 'being in touch' with someone else which I observed on the field.

To return to Turner's work, the scar celebrates the social drama of the social meeting (1980). Such is the case of the round-scar evident after hooks are removed when a suspension is ended. The permanence of the body-sign is transposed as a new feature of the relationship (that the person aims to crystallise) or the self (that the suspension is meant to regenerate). If the body-mark is going to stay forever on the skin, so the social event, and the affinity generated between the actors involved in its creation, will survive forever. This scarification was described as evidence of 'authenticity' by interviewee. In this sense, the body-mark is an aspiration of the participant that harbours the hope that relationships forged

during scarification, or changes within their self, will indeed last forever. The artificiality of the self-designing process becomes evident: the person actively creates a body-mark that they interpret as manifesting a personal feature (in this case the importance given to the value of a friendship) that the individual wants to include as part of his or her form of humanity.

In one of our meetings, José shared a plan he had in mind: he was thinking of removing his belly-button with the support of a professional body modifier. José's aspiration to this surgical operation, also called 'nullification' by body modifiers, represents his desire to distance himself from his religious education, he explains, and to take a step away from some components of his childhood that he does not feel as representative of the man he has become (and that he wishes to be). The action on the body serves to update his biography, giving him the power of moulding himself into what he wants to be, both symbolically and physically. It is not only a sign of wishing for a transformation, but also a statement of how the person self-defines:

I want to take this position ... I want to be the creator of myself, in opposition to Adam and Eva, who were instead creatures made by someone else. I want to step away from this aspect of Catholicism. I want to be the unique owner of my own body. Removing my bellybutton is going to have this meaning for me, as cutting away an umbilical cord that symbolises my connection, my dependency to someone else. I do not want to take distance from my parents, but I want to see my body as independent to anyone else. I would like to do it by myself but it's going to be technically very hard, so I will delegate the task to a technician but it's my decision and I'm the agent of the process (Interview with José, March 2019).

The project of a suited self becomes explicit in José's case: through an action towards the belly button, he aims to design himself as 'creator' of his self. Here, the planned modification assumes an ontological and symbolic existential meaning as part of a total self-ownership approach to the body and to the self. Francesco Remotti's (1996) notion of 'anthropo-poiesis' is helpful in explaining José's self-making project. The term he coined originates from the classic Greek term '*poiein*', and refers to the human capacity to 'make' specific forms of being through body modifications, following negotiated cultural models or forms of humanity. In the ethnographical vignettes presented here, individuals do not rely on pre-existent, culturally sanctioned ways of intervention. Rather, they associate personal existential meanings with actions performed on the flesh. The 'auto-poietic' process maintains the flesh as the stage to (re)produce the self. In the same way that the tattoo represents special episodes in a participant's life, the removal of the belly-button corresponds to the action of distancing the participant from some

elements of their own biography. Body and ideas of self must correspond each other, making and unmaking, taking action to properly mould this correspondence according to the evolution of the self and following appropriate directions of growth. The body is post-humanised because it must be renovated with the evolving self; the self, in this way, cannot be anchored to a given body. The marks on the skin and the processes involving the alteration of the ordinary sensory abilities serve to unlock this process, as anticipated by Paolo above ('I want to see what it is, if it is as fantastic as it seems to be'), when he renewed his 'project of humanity' by including the tattoos referring to the donation experience. The interpretation of suspensions as a means to challenge ordinary perceptual abilities will be discussed in further detail through the case of Maria in the next section.



Figure 2. A new experience of gravity characterises suspension beyond pain, hooks, and stretched skin. Oslo, July 2018.

Maria and her trips

In the summer of 2019, I met Maria, a body modifier in her 40s who was travelling from South America to Europe at the time. She had tattooed her eyes with black ink, almost making her dark iris disappear. Whilst we engaged in conversation, I could not help but losing myself in the dark deepness in her eyes, and felt

undecisive as to where I was supposed to fix my gaze. She also had an implant on her chest, tattoos on her face, hands, and all over the rest of her body, in a colourful and lively mix of animal drawings, geometric patterns, texts, and fluid shapes. She discovered body suspensions ten years ago, she tells me, and from that moment onwards, she became fascinated by the practice. The reasons for, meanings, and expectations of her suspensions evolved over time, but the common thread of her practice continued to be the experience of sensory turmoil:

I love suspensions, they are the best thing of my life! I am so happy to be here [at a suspension festival] because they are the best ... I am addicted to suspensions [laughing] ... Every time [I suspend] I try to go beyond my limits, and I feel that my mind that is full and empty at the same time, it's very hard to explain. I feel everything but anything at the same time. My mind flies away and everything is magnified ... If someone puts a hand on you, it's incredible ... he can touch your soul in that moment! Maybe you should try [laughs]! Every time for me it's very, very intense, as it was with my first suspension, but I just learn suspension after suspension about how to manage ... I feel the adrenalin when they start to put me on the hooks, and then when I lift my feet from the ground it's like a wave of emotions: you are free, you can fly! How many times in your life can you say that you can fly! It's magic! But it's you making the magic, it's your body and your strength that make it possible. And then, when you are done, you come back and I feel that when I put my feet on the ground again, I am kind of reconnecting with the Earth, with the world, with the people, with myself (Interview with Maria, Norway, June 2019).

Maria's story reveals an evolving attitude to suspension that implies an increasing awareness and capacity for control of her body's sensory inputs and potentialities. As in José's case, the relationship between body and self is dynamic for her, because a continuously evolving self cannot be anchored to a static body. Indeed, Maria's sentence 'I am addicted to suspensions' points out the recurrent use of the practice every time she wants to act over herself. At the same time, a subverted and manipulated body is the evidence of an energetic self with a distinct self-identity. Anthony Giddens suggests that self-identity is an individual responsibility in modern society (Giddens 1991). Maria uses suspension as a sensory subversion of how she experiences her being ('I feel everything but anything at the same time'). The practice, in her perspective, expands the horizon of what is possible for her body to do ('How many times in your life can you say that you can fly! It's magic!') and for herself to be ('But it's you making the magic, it's your body and your strength that make it possible').

Maria's testimony focuses on extraordinary sensory shocks. Ethnographical data confirms a shared interpretation among participants that suspension resulted in

trance-like states or altered states of being. In their narrations of suspension practices practitioners often referred to 'mind trips' or 'extra-body experiences'. Maria for instance talked about the paradox of 'having a full and an empty mind at the same time', challenging phenomenological efforts of this author. Sensory experience was perceived by participants as 'out of the ordinary', an experience that they reported was possible to achieve consciously through the act of suspension.

Here I advocate for an interpretation of suspension practice as a strategy to operate on perceptive abilities, altering and enhancing ordinary sensory stimulation of the practitioner. A conscious stimulation of pain is necessary to pass the threshold of liminality (Morinis 1985). Often, hormonal models of causality (based on the production of endorphin and adrenaline due to the insertion of hooks) are discussed in the suspension community in relation to the role of pain in sensory alteration and trance. Pain is signified by this community as connected with the destabilisation of perceptive abilities, especially during hook insertion and the first phase of elevation. But it does not stop there, as José's words suggest: 'there is so much more beyond pain'. During suspension, people break-out from everyday routine and ordinary ways of being, creating what could be named as a 'self-poiesis' through sensory manipulation, or a 'sensory-poiesis'. The self is designed and (re)produced thanks to a conscious and trained process, 'suspension after suspension' in Maria's words, based on the alteration of sensorial abilities in order to produce an enhanced version of the self.

The sensory-poiesis, or the creation of the self through a process of extra-ordinary sensory stimulation, acts on three distinctive levels that empower the person. The first level is the self: the person perceived themselves as different, regenerated, and empowered when they emerge from a transformative experience. On the second level, the practice changes people's perception of others too, to the extent that 'a hand touching a suspendee can even join the soul', as Maria noted. I collected similar narrations referring to facilitators, i.e., those who assist practitioners. By sharing a suspension with others, as when a tattoo is realised with the help of others or a scarification takes place as part of a group practice, a transcending moment is created in which participants can connect with other people, enhancing their relationships in doing so. On a third level, suspendees describe achieving a new perception of the environment in participating in suspending practices, understood sometimes as nature, the Earth or the universe, to the extent that they feel that they are 'somewhere else' during the suspension. They return to their own body when their feet touch the ground again, signifying that moment as the reconnection and re-harmonisation with what characterised their life before the flight. The end of the suspension is the end of liminality, the

moment when the rift is healed, regenerating the destabilised protagonist with a new sense of wellbeing.

Conclusion

This article has explored body suspensions and other forms of body modifications, such as tattoos, scarification, and removal of body parts, as strategies to create specific forms of the self. Using an anthropo-poietical approach (Remotti 1996), I argue for an understanding of self-identity as a making process that is mirrored by body interventions. The ethnographical data presented here reveals the manipulation of perceptive abilities as privileged strategies to stabilise, mould, subvert, and regenerate the self. Through hooks, needles, and scalpels, individuals operate on the image, on the shape, and on the content of the being they want to achieve, enhancing who they are according to individual projects of humanity, in a rhetoric of self-ownership.

I have developed on how skin incisions can fix events and relationships, releasing them and those who experience them from the obliviousness of time. Thus these body marks are used to manipulate time, memory, and self-perception. By engraving those moments through these bodily-oriented practices, the participant gains the means to operate on a selection of their experiences perceived as constitutive of their individuality, moulding a self as constituted by them.

Experiences involving body modifications are also moments of self-exploration: the pain is signified as a gate able to open the practitioner up to new sensory experiences and to exceed ordinary perceptual abilities. Maria started to fly away thanks to suspensions, coming back to earth as a new, stronger being. Through body suspensions, suspension practitioners research new sensory inputs and states of mind, as it was the case for Paolo, who chased the unknown. The motor of the process is a new use of pain that has been socialised in the community, as for the scarification on José, which was made by multiple hands at once, embodying collective emotional bondings. This ethnographic analysis motivates my proposal to think suspensions, tattoos, nullifications and scarification as processes of self-production in terms of 'sensory-poiesis'. Practitioners directly and consciously operate on their capacity to feel and sense, obtaining a regeneration of the self that is similar to the ones that have been observed in rave parties and traditional post-trance rituals (Lapassade 2008). In this sense, the person enhances himself or herself and creates new ways of being and feeling. The new selves of Paolo, José and Maria, originating from the process of sensorial subversion, are powerful, satisfied and in control of their destiny, self-designed as regenerated, authentic, and unique.

Authorship statement

This article is the sole work of the author.

Ethics statement

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