

# 'All Power to the Godfathers' by Alexei Plutser-Sarno

The Russian criminal tattoo is a means of secret communication, an esoteric language of representational images which the thief's body uses to inform the world of thieves about itself. This language resembles thieves' argot and it performs a similar function – encoding secret 'thieves' information' to protect their status and interests (*fraera*). In exactly the same way as argot employs standard, neutral words with 'strictly professional' meanings, the tattoo also conveys 'secret' symbolic knowledge through the use of ordinary allegorical images which at first glance seem familiar to ordinary people. Even the 'tattoo' 'Heil Hitler!', when applied to the body of a Russian convict (*razkaznik*), may have absolutely nothing to do with Hitler or National Socialism in general. As a rule it is a sign of a thief's attitude of denial (*otritsalovka*) or the symbol of a refusal to submit to the prison and camp administration and also, in a broader sense, a total refusal to cooperate in any way with the Soviet authorities.

The meaning of Russian convict tattoos is thus determined in a rather complex manner at the interface of linguistic, visual, social, communicative and psychological contexts. Criminal tattoos are an object of communicative speech which possesses both artistic-representational and psycho-physiological aspects.

Obviously, understanding texts of this kind is extremely difficult. Especially since it is in general difficult to break down visual objects themselves into separate signs and interpret them. All these images (for instance, the combination in a single tattoo of a rose, barbed wire and a dagger) may seem comprehensible, but in reality tattoos of this kind have nothing to do with flowers or cold steel. They form a unitary statement that is not divisible into its constituent elements, conveying the information that the thief came of age in 'places of confinement'. The images in convict tattoos only appear to be 'separate' and understandable. In reality these complex combinations of symbols are inseparable from each

other. The minimal semantic unit in the world of the tattoo is the entire complex of images that has been applied to the body of an individual thief.

Moreover, these tattooed symbols are regarded by the thief himself as real aspects of his life. This is the world in which the thief lives, it is his 'reality'. For the thief, all his tattoos become 'meaningful things'.<sup>1</sup> The world of tattoos is one of symbolic sequences that are accepted as reality and which consequently shape the consciousness of the thief himself, because the tattoos are regarded by the thieves themselves as the effective constitution of the world of thieves, i.e. the fundamental law of thieves' society. A 'legitimate thief' (*vor v zakone*) is the executor of injunctions that have been determined in the reality of the tattoos, which are not only the thieves' 'constitution', but also a set of instructions for implementing this 'fundamental law'. The entire world of thieves ensures that the 'law' is applied. (In this world, false tattoos are not permitted, the punishment for them is death.) The thief's socialisation, his rise up the thieves' professional ladder, requires the unconditional implementation of absolutely all the symbolic 'instructions' contained in tattoos. In other words, it is not the criminal boss (*pakhan*) or the thief himself who stands at the centre of the thief's world, but a code of laws. The tattoos drive and guide a thief's career, they 'appoint' him to new positions. They 'make' him take certain decisions, perform precisely regulated actions, carry out an entire complex of 'ritual' activities. The tattoos 'shape' the daily life of the thief, they subordinate his entire life to themselves. The reality of the tattoo is the symbolic basis of the world of thieves. The thief lives through his tattoos, he is mentally immersed in this reality, that is, he dissolves into the symbolic world of his own body. Like the Herman Hesse character who gets into the last carriage of a train and rides away – a train that he himself drew on the wall of his prison cell.

As the only true law, tattoos inevitably enter into confrontation with the surrounding world that is not the thieves' world. They evoke eternal 'war' against the world of the non-thief, the 'fuzz' (*menty*) and 'bitch' (*suka*). For instance, whether at liberty or in the 'zone' (the jails and prison camps), a thief is often surrounded by 'visual propaganda' in support of the authorities, to which thieves respond with a multitude of anti-slogans. There are tattoos that parody the famous poster 'Have you volunteered?' Others parody official slogans such as 'All power to the Soviets!' (which becomes 'All power to the godfathers!'). Danzig Baldaev's collection includes tattoos parodying this poster: 'You Soviet scum, are you still kow towing, arse-licking and grafting for the CPSU and getting zero point fuck all for it, do you want to be a cripple?' This is entirely conscious and deliberate opposition on the part of the world of thieves. The elements of this informational propaganda war are contained in text of the tattoos themselves, which the convicts call 'a grin at authority' (*oskal na vlast*). Nancy Condee has noted very precisely this ability of the thief's body to

engage in propaganda warfare with the authorities. In her opinion 'the dialogue between a convict's tattoo covered body and the official slogans of the administration was rendered more acute by the fact that the body could not be confiscated: it could be mutilated, subjected to violence, examination and mistreatment; but, for as long as the convict was alive, his body possessed the ability to argue with the camp administration'.<sup>2</sup>

Each authoritative thief (*avtoritetny vor*) bears different versions of these 'grins at authority'. The tattoos are like a mass media complex purveying propaganda opposed to the authorities. Generally the official world is interpreted by thieves as a hostile grouping of thieves. To a 'legitimate thief', Lenin, Stalin, Andropov or Brezhnev are the criminal bosses (*pakhany*) of a competing thieves' clan. The form in which the leaders of the communist party and the government are depicted is not important – a devil, an ass, or a camp supervisor – they are *pakhany*.

The obverse of the 'war' with the world of non-thieves is the struggle against those who 'transgress' the thieves' law. In the world of thieves there are many tattoos conveying information about the raising or lowering of their 'owner's' social status. They are known as *mast*, a word borrowed from the jargon of card-sharps, meaning 'suit'. This word *mast* also has the meanings of an entire grouping of thieves, a community of thieves with a particular speciality, the speciality itself, and a thief's fate, happiness and luck. This, in thieves' argot the phrase 'to hold the suit' (*derzhat' mast*) means 'to have power over a community of thieves, to control them, maintaining order and the observance of the thieves' law'.

A thief may also have a 'thief's family', approved by thieves, the breakdown of relations in such a family may be punished by death. This situation is described in a brilliant story by Dunskey and Frid, *The Best of Them*.<sup>3</sup> These relations may be enshrined in a tattoo, such as the criminal tattoo showing a 'heart' with names inside. Baldaev's collection includes a tattoo showing two hearts containing names threaded onto barbed wire in the form of a heart. This type of tattoo also includes the name of the beloved female thief (*vorovaika*) applied to a specific part of the body. Traditional 'thief's family' tattoos depict a tom cat and a tabby cat.

And so, of course, a tattoo does not refer to a thief's real mother. It is only an abstract positive image, a romantic memory, as in the famous song based on folklore motifs that Nikolai Ivanovsky wrote in the 'zone' in 1946:

Hold on, locomotive, do not hammer your wheels.  
Conductor, press hard on those brakes:  
I want to greet my own mother just one last time,  
To go and show myself to her.

Mother, don't wait for your little boy,  
Mother, never expect your son again:  
The prison camp quagmire has sucked him in,  
He has said goodbye to freedom forever.

My years will pass like the melted snow  
My years may all pass in vain.  
No joy awaits me, I swear on my freedom,  
The camps are waiting for me yet again.

Tattoos signifying the complete 'demotion' (*razzhalovanie*) of a thief may employ depictions of sexual acts, the suit of hearts and or diamonds. All these tattoos signify the act of 'lowering' (*opuskanie*), automatically evoking the repression of their 'owner' by the world of thieves and bringing the thieves' system of punishment into action. There is a whole series of shameful marks which their owners try to destroy by any means when they leave the zone: finger ring form tattoos for a 'shaggy thief' (*mokhnaty vor*),<sup>4</sup> also known as 'shaggy safe-breaker' (*vzломshchik mokhnatogo seifa*), 'sexual bandit' (*polovoi razboinik*) and 'drowned in the cunt' (*utonuvshii v shakhne*), used to mark individuals convicted for sexual crimes, have often been inked in completely when their wearers have left the zone, in imitation of the tattoo 'I came out at the bell' (*Vyshel po zvonku*). Such tattoos were applied compulsorily, accompanied by violence. Frid offers an example on this theme: '...I have only once seen a tattoo on the forehead; a 'played out' thief, one who didn't have the means to settle his debts, had a three-letter word pricked into his forehead by his gambling partners at cards. Some time later, he tried to obliterate these three letters, but even so the 'x' and the 'y' showed thoroughly quite clearly.'<sup>5</sup>

In this way, a system of repression is also a given of tattoo reality. Tattoos of this kind, are applied to people who do not pay back a debt, to stool pigeons (*ssuchenye*), lowered stooges (*chukhany*) and many other social categories of the world of thieves. They signify expulsion from the privileged section of thieves' society. 'Untouchables' (*nepriksaemye* and *chushki* – those who are symbolically 'soiled') and other camp outcasts perform the dirtiest cleaning work and they have a separate barrack building or corner of their own in the living area. 'You must not take anything from them, even a match, or else you will be defiled (*opomoit'sya*), debased (*zashvarkat'sya*), infected (*zakontachit'sya*)'.<sup>6</sup> In this case the convict's body acts like a genuine traitor or executioner towards its owner, since the tattooed body cannot lie. The body pronounces its own sentence, condemns itself to suffering. In this context torture is only another way in which a question is asked of the body, it is only the speech of one thing (the 'pen') addressed to another thing (the body). It is only the body that the thief can trust, only the body that cannot lie.

The thief is symbolically born to the life of thieves as a result of an 'initiation' and performs numerous symbolic functions in the reality of tattoos, which is also where his social death occurs when he is deprived of his status as a thief by tattoos that are brands of disgrace.

All social nexuses are structured on the surface of the body, since all of a thief's 'assignments' are connected with the process of 'recognition'

of tattoos. In real life a thief is most often identified, not from the features of his face and his figure, but precisely from the tattooed surfaces of his body, so a thief's 'face' is his tattoos. Even the parts of his body perform different functions than they do for an ordinary person. The tattooed surface of a thief's body determines all the events of his life and actualises specific stereotypes of behaviour in the people around him.

Tattoos thus play the part of a society's basic code of laws, its legislative institution, its executive institution (which issues decrees) and its mass media, as well as functioning as a document that certifies a person's identity and his social status. It is a kind of official uniform, a collection of regalia, decorations and badges of distinction. His entire life is effectively reflected in these tattoos. Here are all his highs and his lows, his appointments to new positions and his dismissals, his 'secondments' to prison and moves to new 'jobs'.

Now let us imagine the reality of a thief appearing in some everyday situation. When they see his tattoos, all the members of the community immediately understand what to do and how to behave. Order is reinforced and the social structure organises itself. The tattoos play the part of a generator of social behaviour, structuring the life of the entire society of thieves. Even the authorities (primarily the prison and judicial authorities and the regime of confinement in the camp) are often obliged to accommodate themselves to the harsh rules of this world. The tattoos' influence extends much further than it might seem at first glance.

In their role as the mass media, tattoos inform the community of thieves about a newly arrived thief. Having received this information, the community of thieves gives the thief all necessary information about itself, after which the tattoos set in motion distinct processes of self-organisation in the community of thieves – the surrounding world is restructured with reference to authoritative tattoos. Finally, the community of thieves automatically begins to carry out the demands contained in these tattoos, it submits to the authority of the legitimate thief involved.

It is precisely the reinforcement of the communicative function of the body in its tattoos that prompts the thief to extreme restraint in his words, actions and facial expressions. From his point of view words only obscure the meaning of the absolutely reliable information that his tattoos communicate. Remember Babel's *Odessa Stories*: 'Benya doesn't say much, but I wish he'd say more'. The thief himself and his body define, as it were, the background to communication, and in this communication the tattoos vanquish the chaos of the world of thieves.

The tattoos broadcast certain information to the world of thieves simultaneously from many points on the surface of the thief's body, and so the thief's 'speaking' is, as it were, located in every point of his body. Every one of his tattoos is a separate narrator, a separate story. For instance, 'shoulder straps' tattooed on the shoulders speak of a thief's

convictions and his 'position': shoulder straps with three little stars or skulls are deciphered as: 'I am not a slave of the camps, no one can force me to work'; an epaulette with the Russian acronym ZUR signifies 'I've been through the intense regime zone'; BUR signifies 'intense regime barracks'. Inscriptions on the feet can also convey information about the place where the prisoner served his sentence (these are usually texts on the toes, consisting of ten letters in Russian, such as 'MVD Lake Camp', 'Vorkuta convict', 'Aldan Construction', 'Magadan Camps' and so on. Signs on the chest are more serious and carry more status. Most often these are stars with between seven and sixteen points, with skulls, heads of cats, lions, devils or wolves, crosses, candles, crowns, daggers, double-headed eagles, wings, the sign of the suit of spades or clubs and several other central thieves' symbols. Rings round the fingers express a thief's precise caste or professional identity. The image of a key on a ring typifies a thief who burgles flats, a 'houseman'. The inverted sign of the suit of spades signifies a professional 'bandit'. The Russian letter *E* with a crown means 'boss of the expropriators' or 'Leninist robber'.

The actual characters in tattoos are often shown 'talking', so that this is also a 'living' and 'theatricalised' space. The inscription around a tattoo of a woman urinating into a glass reads 'Cunt-struck and joyful – I'll have a piss and you lap it up'. When Lenin commands, 'Shoot them!' his lisped 'r' is reproduced typographically. Another tattoo addresses the camp administration, informing them that its owner considers himself part of the world of thieves and refuses to do any kind of work in the zone: 'Boss, I'm an honest Soviet whore and I've never held anything heavier than a prick and never taken any money, and you give me a spade! Aren't you ashamed?' In contrast, other characters listen to what the world of thieves is saying: next to an image of Mikhail Gorbachev on a donkey, we find a statement from the thieves 'spoken' to the president by the tattoo: 'Perestroika, perestroika, we restructured ourselves straight away. Now we suck each other's tits and clits in the zone. We've got a real cushy number!' Entire scenes from the life of thieves are played out in their tattoos.

Tattoos broadcast their messages to the most varied audiences in the name of various objects. Often they are speaking to uninitiated outsiders (*fraera*): 'Everything that belongs to you and yours always belonged to me and mine'. The so-called 'grin' (*oskal*) tattoo is speech addressed to the authorities. All images of grinning animals belong to this type. Very often a tattoo is a message addressed to thieves on behalf of the world of thieves as a whole: 'Flatten stool pigeons and bitches!' On the other hand, there are also tattoos that are oaths, addressed from the thief to the entire world of thieves: 'I won't graft in the zone for the CPSU and I'm no Soviet serf!', 'A female thief will never be a laundress!' These are formulaic oaths of the rejection of authority (*otritsalovka*).

Sometimes a tattoo is the speech of biblical characters, addressed to

the entire world of thieves: 'It was the Jews who sold Christ! Beat the Jews!' the Virgin Mary appeals, holding the dying Christ on her knees. A tattoo can even be a message to posterity, i.e. a living history of the world of thieves: 'Beat the Jews and drive them out of Holy Russia! Ivan the Terrible'.

The world of thieves still believes implicitly in the power of thieves' talismans (*oberegi*), spells, curses, charms and oaths. In this area, criminal talisman tattoos carry particular authority. In the world of thieves, they represent a power that forces the world beyond to act on the object with which they are associated.

The second type of 'magical' inscriptions belongs to initiation tattoos, which are applied to 'juveniles' (*maloletki*) when they come of age. They show a tulip or a rose tangled in barbed wire, and are made on convicts who have celebrated their 16th or 18th birthday in the 'zone'. If the tattoo belongs to a professional thief, in addition to a flower it should also depict a skull, a dagger and a crown. This means it is the initiation tattoo of a young legitimate thief who 'has robbed since he was little'. The 'juvenile' is subjected to ritual tortures from his first moment of imprisonment, his entire first 'stretch' (*otsidka*) from beginning to end is an act of initiation.

The thieves' symbolic home is the prison, the genuine thief is both born in prison (sometimes symbolically, sometimes actually) and dies there: 'I was born in prison... and I shall die in prison'. The thieves themselves regard their new condition as symbolic death. The theme of death is central to criminal tattoos. For the thief:

- a) Death is not to be feared but desired: 'A thief is not afraid of death'; 'Only death will correct me'.
- b) Death is always close at hand and waiting: 'I am immortal death, always near!'; 'Death is always near – it is deliverance from earthly torments'; 'Death is always waiting for me'.
- c) A thief is already dead: 'I am already a corpse'.
- d) Death dwells within the thief: 'Expect no mercy from me'; 'I shall come for your life soon, bitch'.
- e) Death is the main goal of life: 'I was born to die' – with an image of a skull on a cross.

A candle in a tattoo is also a symbol of death, interpreted by thieves as 'I am alive as long as my candle burns' or 'I shall not be happy in this sinful world, but in the next'. The thief himself is the very face of death, an infernal character. In the world of thieves prison is clearly interpreted as the grave, the world beyond, and visiting this symbolic grave is an important stage in the life of every thief. In this sense this latter formula, of being located within death, describes the specific attitude of thieves to death. Thieves regard themselves as characters of the world beyond.

One of the 'genres' of the magical tattoo is the so-called 'autograph'. As a rule this is the name of the 'owner of the body', his nickname

(*klikukha*) or any symbol that takes its place. In our modern culture, such tattoos are often unjustly regarded as expressions of 'vulgarity', since in modern civilisation the body is the most precious of all objects and it must not be 'spoilt' by inscriptions. However, the more sacred the object, the greater the status of any inscription made on it. A person's name applied to his body is no longer addressed to just anyone who happens to see it, it is a ritual object. In such cases an autograph may also be regarded as a signature under one's own life.

A thief's set of tattoos is also a symbolic 'portrait' of the thief, it is a magical mirror in which he sees himself. The very image of a legitimate thief is constructed out of the 'titular' status symbols signifying a thief mentioned above: a tiger, a lion, a badger, a panther, a wolf, a werewolf, a devil, a raven, an eagle, a bat, a cat, a star, a crown, a sword, a skull, a skeleton, the suits of spades and clubs. All these signs fuse into a single, polysemantic image-symbol of an abstract legitimate thief, and through this prism the real thief perceives himself as a 'night beast', a 'bloody predator', a 'mighty king' and a 'many faced devil'. This is not the image of a man or an animal, either living or dead, living between the darkness and the light. It is the image of a magical werewolf who dwells 'between' worlds. Indeed, the eagle, the raven, the bat, the wolf and the cat are also traditional symbols of the werewolf. The theme of the werewolf is undoubtedly central to criminal tattoos and to the world of thieves in general. The tattoos themselves contain many variations on this theme:

- a) A head that is half a cat's and half a horned werewolf's.
- b) A head that is half a cat's and half a man's.
- c) A head that is half a girl's and half a horned devil's with cat's teeth.
- d) A skull with an eagle's wings.
- e) A horned skull.
- f) A horned vampire.
- g) A devil with wolf's ears.

For the thief 'night work', a mysterious 'two-faced' quality and constant 'initiatory' changes of status are all traditionally associated with the symbolic perception of himself as a werewolf. This is also commonplace outside the world of thieves, the Russian word for 'werewolf' has been used from time immemorial to mean 'thief'. In Dahl's famous 19th century dictionary a 'werewolf' is already a former convict: "Tramps and inveterate thieves call a man who has returned from exile in Siberia a werewolf".<sup>7</sup>

In this way the thief's 'folklore' authority, his ideal image, imposes on him the perception of himself as a character from a world in which magic is 'reality'. The image of the 'werewolf' is only a figure of speech, but this metaphor exists in the context of a belief in magic. The thief does not, of course, regard himself literally as a 'wolf-man'. He can only transform himself into the hero of his own thief's 'myth', into a character from the

world of tattoos. The tattoo-man in this way can gradually transform into a complex of 'symbols' which at times are distinctly magical in nature.

In the world of thieves a body without tattoos is perceived as 'naked', 'weak', 'dying', 'unauthoritative', 'unmanly', really no kind of body at all, entirely lacking in status. As Baudrillard puts it: '...a tattoo applied directly to the body alongside other ritual signs transforms the body into material for symbolic exchange: a body without tattoos, like a body without a mask, would merely be a body as such – naked and inexpressive'.<sup>8</sup>

It is 'no kind of body' because it is concealed within itself, closed, its essential nature is not displayed. During the initiation described above the surface of the body, and with it the essential inner nature of the thief, lose their 'virginity'. The thief emerges as it were from within onto the surface of the body, passing through his symbolic 'death' into the world of thieves. That is, tattoos are at one and the same time the gateway into the thieves' world beyond, and that world itself in its most corporeal manifestation. Tattoos as a social body create a visual form for this apprehensible, palpable surface of the 'body of the real'. The removal of tattoos, (which is practised by both the 'fuzz' and thieves themselves) is the social death of the thief, which is followed by physical death. That is precisely the way in which a thief is killed when he has appropriated someone else's tattoos. Such tattoos can only 'disappear' together with the man or a part of his body: if his tattoo is not deserved, they tell him: 'You have two or three hours, use sandpaper, anything you like, a knife or glass – remove it, otherwise we'll beat you until you're half dead. Terrified by the real threat of losing his health or his life, this convict removes his tattoos'.<sup>9</sup> Other types of unauthentic but less high-ranking tattoos are removed with the skin, but their 'owner' may remain alive. A thief deprived of his tattoos is a thief deprived of a body, that is, he is like an invisible man or a hollow man, he has no identity on the social plane. In the world of thieves a man who has no tattoos is symbolically non-existent.

A thief's body is the form in which the world of thieves clothes its thoughts, even for the thief himself, it is the 'external world' in which he lives. In this sense his skin coincides with the boundaries of his symbolic universe. That is, the tattooed body is the only thing that exists in the world of thieves. And this body is the only place in which the world of thieves can exist. For the sake of their tattoos, thieves perform feats of heroism, sacrifice themselves, go to prison camps and even die. Paradoxical as it may seem, a thief is prepared at a moment's notice to 'sacrifice' his body to his own tattoos, that is, to himself. A thief's body is a simultaneous process of the acquisition of symbols of corporeality and movement away from the 'reality' of the ordinary body towards the symbolic body. It is as if there is nothing of value inside the thief and the value of his body is on the surface. Knife wounds merely lay bare such a body, exposing the radical 'emptiness' of it. To the legitimate thief a blow with a knife is more of a

spiritual trauma than a physical one. A trauma which is akin to the process of tattooing itself.

Thieves themselves are not conscious of their bodies as something intimate, a process of 'deintimisation' of the body takes place. Valery Frid describes a scene of collective masturbation in the Alekseev Bath House: 'The criminals were not at all ashamed of this activity, they masturbated in company and were even surprised if one of them abstained.'<sup>10</sup>

From the scholar's point of view, and the internal viewpoint of the thief, the thief's body is primarily a public space. A crowned legitimate thief must not be touched with the hands, the punishment for that is death. Not because his body is an intimate possession, but because it is too symbolic.

Tattoos thus form a complete world which observes itself. In this world tattoos are constantly compared and a war of tattoos is conducted for creation of hierarchical and symbolic structure in the world. That is, the tattoos destroy the objective, material world, constructing on its fragments their own, invented world of thieves, which they symbolise and signify. A man thus becomes a part of the all-embracing world of tattoos and the intimate corners of human flesh are transformed into a place for the public 'politics' of thieves.

In the world of thieves the actual process of tattooing is frequently performed forcibly and so also transformed into a 'torture', that is, into pleasure mixed with fear. Such torture is a symbolic means of forcing the body to speak the truth about itself in the future.

All these scars are notches along the journey of life, they contain the story of the thief's life. These sculptural and landscape elements on a man's body indicate that the body itself is regarded as an incomplete object, the substance of which must be used to create the thief or to destroy him. We are dealing here with a ritual act of dehumanisation of the body.

As well as the symbolic operations that may be performed in order to sexually 'improve' a thief's body: (spheres are sewn into his foreskin and 'whiskers' or 'bracelets' set into it; the head of his penis is cut into four parts, becoming a 'tulip' increasing in size many times over during erection);<sup>11</sup> similar operations are performed to transform parts of the thief's body into instruments of execution and in this way the entire sexual sphere of his life mutates into a region of 'torture', where the biological penis is transformed into a death dealing symbolic phallus which becomes an instrument of torture. And it is significant that this phallus is called a 'tulip', in other words it bears the same name as the most important symbol of the world of thieves – the first 'initiation tattoo'. This mutilated sexual member is regarded as 'adult' and 'manly'. It is only through transformations of this kind that the body is eroticised, transformed from a child's body to an adult's, as Baudrillard has observed: '...The body may be eroticised by the application... of a tattoo'.<sup>12</sup> In this sense the tattoo is a symbolic substitute for the erotic. Each of the thief's

succeeding tattoos is a new sexual act, a new torture, a new wound, a new 'initiation', resurrecting the thief's symbolic body and killing his biological organism, distancing him from his original 'empty', uneroticised body.

The very profession of a thief – the fearful entry into some dark, alien space in order to extract something from it, while taking pleasure in the act – has links with certain erotic meanings.

It is no accident that the thief's most important weapon in his tattoos is the punitive sword, the dagger or, more rarely, the spear. In the tattoos these are often thrust into the mouth or vagina of the victim. That is, in the tattoos these symbols of a thief's power acquire certain phallic features. And it is not only at the subconscious level that the process of tattooing and the tattoos themselves are perceived erotically.

And so, one of the greatest pleasures that a thief knows is the possession of a high status tattoo, the pleasure of the torture in the process of tattooing and the anticipation of this torture in the context of the constant threat of death. Here '...we encounter a subject... who can only achieve full satisfaction... if he is threatened by a certain image of the 'gallows', that is, if in doing this thing, he breaks some prohibition'.<sup>13</sup> The thief torments himself and he torments others, but the pain and humiliation give him a feeling of immortality. The thief is the executioner of the 'world of non-thieves', on which he must inflict pain and suffering. The thief is transformed from subject to object, into an instrument for the attainment of pleasure by the Other. The thief does not 'wish for' his victim's death, but he is forced to kill by that Other who is 'the law of the world of thieves' in the person of his tattoos. He does not act of his own volition, but at the command of duty: '...There is always something exalted in the expression of a judgement that defines our Duty: in this I elevate the object to the level of the Thing.' (Lacan's definition of sublimation). The complete acceptance of this paradox obliges us to reject any reference to 'duty' as a justification: 'I know that this is hard and it can be painful, but what I can do is my duty...' The standard motto of aesthetic severity runs as follows: 'There is no justification for not performing your own duty!' although Kant's '...You can, because you must!' would seem to propose a new version of this motto, it implicitly amplifies it through its far more supernatural inversion: 'There is no justification for fulfilling your own duty!'<sup>14</sup> The thief seemingly takes pleasure, not in the torments of his victims, but in the sense of duty fulfilled. He himself is prepared to suffer torments and will take pleasure in the torments of his own body in the alienated roles of object and thing, accepted the pricking of the needle as a thief's supreme pleasure. It is as if with regard to his tattoos the thief thinks: 'I am not saying this, it is the world of thieves that is saying it'.

As we have already said, a thief's tattoos require specific, precisely defined reactions from him to certain events. A specific mood, a specific feeling, a specific state of mind. That is, we can see the tattoos as a kind

of mechanism controlling the changes in the thief's state of consciousness and sometimes as generating these states. It is precisely in this context that the perception arises of one's speaking self as speaking in the name of some other source, in the name of 'the world of thieves', i.e. in the name of one's tattoos. And since in this connection it would even be possible to speak of the symbolic explication of states of consciousness on the surface of the body, the tattoos themselves are also a certain reality of consciousness, although not, of course, of consciousness itself, but of the visualisation of certain of its forms, perceived by the thief himself as a 'mirror' of his identity. And once again as an external source of identity, i.e. the entire complex of tattoos can be experienced as a symbolic, ideal 'I' extrapolated from the individual, located not only 'inside' the person, in his consciousness, but also outside him – as a source of 'desires' and 'demands'. This thief's ideal is once again very reminiscent, in a whole series of characteristic features, of Lacan's Other, who represents a certain ideal instance, an ideal source of speech.

The thief communicates something to the world through his tattoos, they are his speech and his instrument of speech, but at the same time it is as if it is not him speaking, but some ideal instance of the 'I', projected externally, reassuring the thief concerning his childish doubts about his identity and the very fact of his existence. The thief is obsessed by thoughts of death and the fear of loss, '...the unbearable fear of perceiving oneself as non-existent...'<sup>15</sup> since the thief experiences himself as living in a world of death surrounded by death. The tattoos protect him from his own fears, they reassure him, make good what is lacking, give him respect. That is why a thief is more afraid of his tattoos being destroyed than of castration. But on the other hand, throughout his life the thief is surrounded by the Other. It is as if he lives in the womb of the 'thief's mum'.

Existing invisibly within this symbolic thieves' reality is also a certain imaginary and ideal set of tattoos the thief hopes to earn in the future.

In the course of his life the thief 'expresses' his body, gives it shape (like a body builder or artist), and through his body he also gives shape to the sequences of symbols in his consciousness. A struggle for symbols takes place, because only '...tattoos on the body... guarantee the inclusion of the subject in... a symbolic order...'<sup>16</sup> As he is gradually, over the course of his life, covered with tattoos, the 'legitimate thief' mutates into a monument, into his own ideal. This perception also generates a feeling of distance between the 'self' and the 'Other'. The thief is gradually clothed in the skin of this Other. As if born without a body, the thief spends his entire life creating an ideal body for himself. And so the tattoos realise the connection between the thief and his imaginary 'I'. The thief wants to be the person who is drawn on him, he wants to be the person who is programmed into his tattoos. In this sense the tattoos are the object of his love.<sup>17</sup>

In periphrasis of Lacan, one might say that the thief's desires are the

desires of his tattoos. A thief's basic desire is to match his tattoos perfectly, that is, to carry out the law of thieves, to be acknowledged by his own tattoos, i.e. by the Other, who spares the thief death and humiliation. But if it is the Other who speaks and acts through the tattoos, in a certain sense the tattoos are pictures of the thief's unconsciousness. That is, the world of criminal tattoos is to a certain extent a realm of the externalisation or, perhaps, visualisation of the unconscious.

- 1 Mikhail Yampolsky. 'Language-Body-Event' (*Yasyk-Telo-Sluchai*), Moscow: *The New Literary Review (Novoye Literaturnoe Obozrenie)*, 2004. p.10.
- 2 Nancy Condee. 'Graphic Art on the Body: Tattoos and the Collapse of Communism' (*Grafika na Tele: Tatuirovki i Krakh Kommunizma*), *The New Literary Review (Novoye Literaturnoe Obozrenie)*, 1999, No. 39.
- 3 Yu. Dunsy, V. Frid. 'The Best of Them' (*Luchshe iz Nihk*) in *Film Scenarios (Kinostenarii)*, 1992, No. 3, pp. 118-131.
- 4 A rectangle divided diagonally with the sign of the suit of hearts in the upper right corner.
- 5 Valerii Frid. 'Fifty-eight and a Half, or The Notes of a Camp Halfwit' (*58 s Polovinoi ili Zapiski Lagernogo Pridurka*), [sunsite.unc.edu/pub/academic/russian-studies/Literature](http://sunsite.unc.edu/pub/academic/russian-studies/Literature).
- 6 'Prisoners' Tattoos: An album' (*Tatuirovki Zaklyuchennykh: Al'bom*), St. Petersburg: Limbus Press, 2001, p. 135.
- 7 V. Dahl. 'An Explanatory Dictionary of the Living Great Russian Language' (*Tolkovy Slovar' Zhivogo Velikorusskogo Yazyka*), third enlarged edition, ed. I.A. Baudouin de Courteney, St. Petersburg, 1903-1909. Vol. 2.
- 8 Jean Baudrillard. 'Symbolic Exchange and Death', translated with an introductory article by S.N. Zenkin. *Dobrosvet*, Moscow, 2000.
- 9 D.S. Baldaev. Talkin on Igor Pomerantsev's programme 'Above the Barriers' (*Poverkh Bar'erov*). Radio Freedom, 9 June 1998.
- 10 Valerii Frid. 'Fifty-eight and a Half, or The Notes of a Camp Halfwit' (*58 s Polovinoi ili Zapiski Lagernogo Pridurka*), [sunsite.unc.edu/pub/academic/russian-studies/Literature](http://sunsite.unc.edu/pub/academic/russian-studies/Literature).
- 11 Alexei Plutser-Sarno. 'The Language of the Body and Politics: The Symbolism of Thieves' Tattoos', *Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopaedia*, Steidl / FUEL 2003, p. 49.
- 12 Jean Baudrillard. 'Symbolic Exchange and Death', translated with an introduction by S.N. Zenkin. *Dobrosvet*, Moscow, 2000.
- 13 Zizec and Slavoi. 'Kant and Sade: An ideal couple'. Translated by T.A. Dorokhova, [anthropology.ru/ru/texts/translab/texts/zizec/zizec](http://anthropology.ru/ru/texts/translab/texts/zizec/zizec). *Lacanian Ink*, NY, 1998, No. 13, pp. 12-25.
- 14 *ibid*, pp. 12-25.
- 15 Slavoi Zizec. 'Welcome to the desert of the Real II: Reflections on the World trade Centre', [www.lacan.com/reflections](http://www.lacan.com/reflections).
- 16 *ibid*, [www.lacan.com/reflections](http://www.lacan.com/reflections).
- 17 This is reminiscent, of course of *The Picture of Dorian Grey* by Oscar Wilde. Ward, Lock & Company, London, 1891.