

The discourse of cutting – a study of visual representations of self-injury on Internet

Introduction

In this paper I will argue for the notion that skin cutting is a way of making sense to pain. The line of argumentation is based on understanding of self-injury, especially the practice of cutting, is to be understood as a kind of language and speaking of an inner pain.

The foundation for the argumentation is a study on visual representations of self-injury that I've been carrying out for some years now. Two years ago I received research grant from the Swedish Research Council for the project *The Semiotics of Pain - self inflicted pain as communication*. The research project is placed at Gender studies, a section of Global Political Studies, Malmö University, Sweden.

Originally the purpose for the project was study three (sub-)cultures in which pain is a dominating or even a constituting element – self-injurers, modern primitives and body art (as it's practiced in the field of fine art). As the study developed there has been a shift in the understanding of the ground for the practice of self-injuring in general and especially when the technique of cutting is practiced. The original presumption that the communication was based on pain, in which communication through emphatic understanding played a central role, has been replaced by the notion that it's pain (or other strong "inner" emotions) that's communicated. One of the reasons for this change is statements from a lot of self-injurers that don't feel any pain during the activity or others that state that the pain is something of secondary importance or even something undesired element.

At this stage it's important to emphasize that, as I understand it, the sensations and emotions involved in self-injuring activities, as well as the reasons for them, are very individual and the purpose here is more to discuss and problematize rather than to make generalizations.

One of the reasons for the study's focus on visual aspects of self-injury is my background as an art historian and this is also the reason for the emphasize on cutting, a form of injuring that has a strong visual character. My doctoral dissertation was study of performance art (or as I prefer to call it. action art), that's an artistic expressions based concrete executed action from the artist and a genre in which you'll often finds extreme expressions and quite often self-mutilating activities. The question that originally draw my attention was the difference of discursive understanding and interpretation of self inflicted violence depending on who's doing it and in which context it's executed; for example how come that an artist that cuts herself isn't interpreted as a symptom of psychological problems while the same act automatically is interpreted as such when performed by a girl in solitude.

With the perspective from gender studies follows that questions about the construction of gender and bodies is crucial for the study. Another important theoretical standpoint is that visual representations produced and exposed in a mass medial discourse, created by non-professionals is as interesting as artworks constructed by artist in the art world. I would actually go so far as to state that it's far more important if you're interested in understand the spirit of the time (or a discourse) to study the common images that's exposed repeatedly in mass media, instead of the unique art pieces in galleries or museums.

In connection to this I also propose that images gives us a special understand that is not possible to get through analyzes of other medial representations, like different kinds of ver-

bal texts (words spoken or written). Especially when we regard self-injury a practice that often is described as a method of expressing feelings or experiences that are hard or impossible to formulate in words. Fundamental aspects of the activity of for instance cutting (or other ways of injuring yourself) can in respect to this be the sensual experience, but also the way it transforms something unspeakable to something concrete and visual (as a bleeding wound or a scar)

The images in this study is taken from a website, an internet community dedicated to information about self-injury and support to self-injurers. As a typical community it includes resources like information; links to other websites and suggestions of literature that deals with the subject, tips and tricks for coping strategies to resist urges. It also makes it possible to interact: it's possible to participate in discussions and exchange of feelings and experiences at a moderated thread forum and private messages, it also possible to give contributions such as personal stories of experiences connected to self-injury, poems and pictures. Member of the community is almost without exceptions people with personal experience of self-injury, and the advice given is therefore based on their own experience.

Terminology, definitions

Definitions of central terms: What do I mean with cutter discourse? With the use of cutter I allude to a practice of skin cutting that's deployed by a group of people, mostly young, who commonly is referred to as self-harmers or self-injurers. Self-injurers is usually defined, after the American psychiatrist Armando Favazza, as someone who repeatedly has inflicted superficial injuries or mutilations to themselves without suicidal intentions. A self-injurer is also said to have difficulties to resist the impulse to harm themselves. The act is often understood as a response to an increasing feeling of inner tension which is brought to an end with the injury and is replaced by a feeling of relief.

Many scholars draw a line between social acceptable forms of self-injury and deviant activities. The latter often is seen as a pathological symptom, which is common in connection to syndromes like posttraumatic stress disorder or borderline personality disorder. In connection to this a lot of writers on the subject isn't, in my opinion, making a distinction between injury by proxy¹ (Jeffreys 2000:414), as an act carried out by another person (for instance as circumcision, or other forms of initiation rituals, or the in the industrial world so common practice of piercing), and when it's an act executed by the person to themselves. Which is the case nearly all images in my study, as far it's possible to determine.

I understand the term discourse is founded on the work by the Danish scholars Winther Jørgensen & Philips' (1999) reading of Laclau & Mouffe's discourse theory. In this paper I will not go into to much excessive use of terminology and theoretical investigations so I will limit the description of discourse as it's used here to: I'll use discourse in two different, but not opposing ways. Discourse is defined on one hand as the meaning production produced in the field, the discourse order, that's created with and around the practice of cutting; and on the other hand, in a more symbolic way, as the way meaning is produced by the cutting itself. In the latter definition cutting becomes a speech act produced on and by penetrating the skin. Skin is understood as the place for constructing the individual.

¹ genom fullmakt (ombud)

Previous research

My understanding of skin cutting as a communication, that resembles or even is identical to a speech act, is an approach that we can find among many other writings about Self-Injury and that discuss issues concerning the body. To explain self-injury among women as a need to articulate in absence of another way of expressions is also in line with Lacanian theories about women's lack of a language. If not taken to literary Lacan's rereading of Freud's psychoanalytic theories, so influential among feminist writers since the 70s, deals with questions about power, oppression and who has the right to speak.

I will not summarize the extensive writing about self-injury that have emerged during since the 80s. Mostly the studies that has been made by scholars coming from psychological, medical and sociological disciplines. Rarely, to my knowledge, you'll find research concerning the cultural expressions connected to self-injury. There is of course some examples for instance Barbara Brickman's study on the construction of a prototypical, female self-injurer, or the Swedish ethnologist Anna Johansson with her coming doctoral dissertation concerning web based biographical narratives from self-injurers.²

Research concerning internet based communities for self-injurers has often originated from psychological and medical discourses. Early studies emanated from a need to understand and make a survey over this new media's impact on patients who self-injured and that was active on internet communities. The result of these studies often stressed that although the community could have a positive effect, because they could break the isolation that many self-injurers otherwise is suffering from, they often came to the conclusions that these sites could create and promote a deviant identity, as *cutter*. They also often was critical against the advice that was given, because they came from people without education and that the sites could keep people in need from seeking professional help. Other research based on users opinion gives sometimes another picture: users of these sites states that the help required from these communities is more useful than the ones given by professional (example of this is advice in how to resist the urge to self-injure).

Images of self-injury has to my knowledge not been the subject for any academic studies, so far. Often you'll find short comments about how dangerous graphic content and images of self-injury is for self-injurers. This kind of material is commonly understood as triggering, a notion that's, at least, officially shared by most sites and communities. Visitors are warned before they is exposed to images and it is forbidden to publish or link to images on forums. One of the purpose of this study has been to take a closer look on the images of self-injury and to problematize these presumptions'.

Limitations and perspectives

In the following skin cutting is understood as a practice grounded in a cultural context. this practice has during the latest decades become the a spread, though not accepted, method of handling *bad-feeling*. By using the imprecise term bad-feeling I point out that cutting (as well as other forms of self-injury) can be a reaction to many different experiences and situations, from stress before an examination in school to severe psychological conditions like post-traumatic stress. In line with theories about cultural diseases I understand cutting as a contemporary practice to handle experiences of stress, anxiety and other form of psychological distress. Some researcher claims that self-injury has replaced eating disorder as the most "popular" way of handling bad-feelings. If that's correct might be hard to establish, and it seems

² Give more examples

likewise hard to really determine if there's really more people self-injure today than before. But at least we are certainly witness an increase of attention to the phenomena in media. Without being too specific (as the time isn't long enough) we can also see how media creates a role model for self-injurers and that the practice becomes a more or less stereotypical way of depicting young people (mostly girls) in distress. More than once we have seen the scene of a young girl going into her room (or bathroom) where she cuts her arm. As far as I can see these kind of representation is strong interpellating texts, that teaches a pattern for coping with problematic situations.

As clear by this paper's title I focus on the type of self-injury that manifests itself as skin cutting. There's two reasons for this: Cutting is the most common technique of injuring, according to several studies and that is also the case in my material. The other reason is that it is a visual practice, both during the activity and as index of something that has happened.

Images of cutting

The material for the study is above 6000 images, mostly photographs published by the users of a site for self-injury information and support. The images are public accessible. When compared to other images of self-injury you'll find on common photo sites like flickr or the Swedish Bilddagboken (Picture diary) I estimate that my material is fairly average. Why I choose this collection of images was due to the fact that it's very rare to find so many images easily accessible on the same place.

As part of the project's aim to understand the significance of the images for the producers and consumers a survey has been carried out. The result from this will only be briefly touched upon in this presentation.

To be able to grasp such a large material I choose to create a database searchable on categories such as: who had produced the images, which reference to sex; what was reproduced, with regard to different kinds of representations of a body, for instance which part (where it was possible to determine); what kind of injury with regard to method, and also which phase of the activity (bleeding wounds or scars) etcetera.

The gender perspective in the study made it interesting to see if there were differences in the expressions regarding to sex. Not surprisingly was producers which could be referred to as female (detected by their presentation or the content of the images) dominating. This is in line with prevalence in most of the studies of self-injury and taken in consideration that girls are more active in social communities on internet and more often contribute with material like images this is a result what could be expected. We could therefore presume that the content in the material could be representative for images of self-injury published on internet.

One important aspect is that, as far as it's possible to detect, nearly all images are self-portraits. The material for the study is therefore consisting of images, in the form of photographs taken by people that self-injure of their own self-inflicted injuries.

All images are digital or at least digitalized. The development of the digital photo technique, that digital cameras are implemented in mobile phones that people carries with them all of the time, and the reduction of cost for producing them and distributing them world wide on internet, are two important factors for the production of the images. We could also assume that the short time necessary from the photo's taken until it's able to have it published on the internet is an important factor for the amount of images on the internet. It's quick which means less time for reconsideration if it's a good idea to spread them.

As photographic representation they are conceived as indexical signs or traces that has a direct physical relation to the content that's depicted. These conceptions create an air of au-

thenticity, and they are understood as documents (this notion lingers on despite knowledge of how easy it is to manipulate photographs with digital technique). Another reason for assuming that the images as trustworthy representations (in that sense that they are produced with an honest intent) is several studies showing that it is unusual that people fake identity etcetera on the internet.

Images of bodies or more precise body parts is the dominating motif in the material. Arms is the dominating part of the body depicted (when it was possible to determine), followed by legs (mostly thighs). Images with faces is very uncommon a fact that's probably due to most of the producers wish to be anonymous. Close ups, only showing skin, is one of the largest categories. Other studies also shows an over representation of arms as a place for cutting, something that makes my material representative.

The method of inflicting the injury that's dominating the material is cutting, more than nine out of ten of the wounds seem to be done with razor blades, knives and other sharp objects. In this aspect, that cutting is so dominating, the content of the images differ from studies concerning self-injury. One explanation could be that cutting is more interesting visual and because of that provokes an impulse to take a photo of it. Nearly three out of four shows scars and almost half of the images shows bleeding wounds. In the material we also finds images of traces of cutting, for instance blood stains, and in around 15% shows text on, mostly cut into, the skin. Contextualizing elements is very rare, in some there's fragments of the room in which the body is situated but mostly nothing at all.

In this presentation I will focus on some typical, representative features of the images in my study. As points of departure I will discuss some photos of cutting that resembles typical ways of constructions in the material of the study – we could call them prototypical. The first is image we consider is an example of the statistical most frequent representation of cutting (or to be precise indexical signs – scars from previous cuttings). If we look at this image as an example (fig 1): As a statistically representative image in the material it is taken by a female (or at least with a female identity on the site), it depicts a part of the body, an arm with scars and it is lacking contextualized features.

In the discourse constituted of self-injurers you'll often find express of a wish to be for real, to be authentic. These images could be understood as way of expressing something true, as documentations of something real. How is then truth constructed in this images. We have already touched upon the idea that photographs has a capacity to produce truth. Another aspect is the production of truth considering formal or plastic qualities of the images. The Dutch socio semioticians Kress & van Leeuwen are using the term modality to describe truth making in images. According to their theory different plastic qualities is important to consider, like color saturation, differentiations and modulations, illumination and light. And also representative aspects like contextualization, and if the image is abstract or have a richness in details. Different configurations of these (and other aspects) creates different coding orientations that is producing truth in different discourses.

If we try to use Kress & van Leeuwens model (a task that's easier said than done – to qualify the different modality markers turns out to be quite complicated) on our example we can see that although the color saturation is quite rich (it's far from being black and white) the differentiation is quite low; and that goes for the contrast and the variation of light as well. The image is blurry and without many details, its lacking contextualization because it without elements that depicts spatiality and depth. Taken together we see an image that's quite abstract, reduced on details and modulations. Kress & van Leeuwen suggest that this modality, could be labeled as an *abstract coding orientation* which has “reduced the individual to

the general, and the concrete to its essential qualities” (1996/2006:165). They mean that this kind of images is typical for high art, academic or scientific discourses. Hardly the ones you associate with self-injury. It can also seem as a paradox that an activity understood as very private and egocentric is communicating with a visual expression that’s reducing the individual. We shall see that this tendency is repeated in many of the following interpretations.

We can also mention that photographs with low technical quality, like the ones in the study, often is seen as a sign of it’s being documentary. We have been used to see photos from eyewitness taken with simple equipment nearly daily in the news. Bad quality often signifies truth.

In spite of the dramatic content the composition is astonishing balanced and harmonic. The drama is not created by the images formal qualities. Often is the part of the image that’s of mayor interest enclosed by two image fields (as in fig. 1). We could interpret it as a framing, the creation of a stage for the action to take place.

Bodies inscribed in a visual field without contextualization and with no depicting of depth or perspective is bodies without the possibility to act. Movement and action is due to a third dimension. This has been interpreted from a feministic perspective by Laura Mulvey, professor in film and media studies, as a way of objectifying the depicted. She argued in a famous article that women in classical Hollywood films are represented in a two dimensional setting (1973). The Swedish semiotician Anders Marner suggest that a purpose for isolate an element in a image from it’s environment could be to give it a more generalized meaning. (Marner 1999:74). In the images the bodies are fragmentized, we can only see parts of the body like in a symbolic cut-up. This way of representing bodies, and especially female bodies, is according to feminist art historians common in art practices (especially in modernist art), in advertising and fashion photographs. A body in parts is becoming a thing, without the power of a body depicted as an organic whole, as a subject with the freedom of action. The English art historian Griselda Pollock states that we are so used to view representations of cut-upped female bodies that the cut-up itself has become a sign for femininity (1990:439).

Extreme close-ups, in which skin tissue is filling up the whole picture, is a special category of image in the collection (fig. 2). These images is lacking representations not only of a room that surrounds the body, but also which part of the body the skin is belongs. The close-ups accentuate even more the abstract qualities than the most frequent image type. In these type of representations the skin appears as a surface or a canvas for inscription.

The body becomes totally decontextualized in the close-ups, the lack of markers of context like gender, class or culture creates a body that’s wipes out all other discursive positions apart from being a body that been cut, that belongs to a cutter. Because of this lack of context follows many opportunities of identification (except maybe when it comes to race) – everybody has a body, and have been wounded sometimes. Close-ups cutter images therefore reminds of clinical images from medicine literature with clinical depictions of dermatoses that, as common in nature science, isolate bodies from contexts.

In the history of the western world has men and women been associated with formal qualities. Neo platonian thinking, that’s been very influencing, asserts that woman is shapeless, chaotic, unlike the men that represent form and structure. Women are characterized by less capacity when it comes to intelligence, control etc – she is more nature than men are. Women are more meat, she is meatier than men (Hirdman 2001:29-30). The gender order is clear in conceptions of that straight and sharp geometrical forms more masculine than the feminine rounded and organic forms. If we apply this notion on fig. 1 we see how the arm,

with its soft roundness represent something feminine – nature, while the carved sharp lines creates a structure, an order. This interpretation could be verified by the understanding that cutting (and self-injury) is a strategy to re-establish control. From a gender perspective the interpretation could be formulated like this: In the image will see how the feminine flesh is disciplined by masculinities sharp instrument. Even clearer seems this to us when we consider the images where blood is pouring out of the wounds (fig. 3). Through the more or less straight cut is blood, a organic chaotic form element, pouring out. The bad blood as let out (Favazza 1987/1996:273) and leaves a structured entity on the skin, the scars – a sign for the re-establishing of order.

The interpretation that has been suggested so far is very much based on “classical” feminist theories derived from academic the field art history and film theory. The problem with this approach is that it often seems to recreate the female position as a victim. From a discursive perspective we know that the way we talk about the world is creating it and therefore we could ask for alternative ways of interpretations, that could go beyond the constituting dichotomy between male and female.

Cutting as images

The amount of scars varies a lot between the images. In some cases (not so few) when the number of cuts/scars becomes big enough a criss-cross pattern is created (fig. 4). This pattern could resemble the structure of a woven textile. When the cutting has been going on for a long time a thicker skin is created by thickening scar tissues (keloid). Symbolically this skin re-figuration could be seen as the creation of a “another layer to the body – a ‘second skin’ – that in a sense provide a measure of extra containment and protection” (Milia 2000 :61). We can therefore understand the cutting when it comes this far as an act of resistance. An act directed against the interventions of the world, cutting is separating the body from the body of others. Self-destructive act often seen as repulsive and pushes people away – and creates a temporary isolation (Milia 2000:74).

The deviant character of the act of cutting is one important feature to consider. Cutting isn’t accepted in most discourses and the activity by the executor experienced as something shameful. Because of this negative and depreciation it can be an way to withdraw from situations that’s unbearable. (If it would have been accepted than it would have lost this value.) This is another example of cutting as a strategy of resistance. To deliberately (and often permanent) cut and thereby disfigure the beauty of the skin is also a very strong rejection of the hegemonic ideals of beauty (especially for young women). This is also an act of resistance.

With these few examples we can see that it is possible to interpret cutting as something quite different from the notion of a cutter as a victim. By giving actorship to the cutter another type of cutter arises – instead of the passive object we’ll get an active subject in stubborn opposition against the state of circumstances.

The caption of this section: “Cutting as image” is not only a way of giving the paper a circular structure, it is also a way of stressing the importance of cutting as a form of communication and not at least a communication with the acting subject as recipient. Understood as an act of formulating and thereby making sense of a indefinable “inner” feeling the cutting could be regarded as text. A text that concretize this feeling and perhaps makes it more bearable.

The purpose of texts is to formulate a message and communicate it. What is the message that cutting communicate? This is a question that’s not so easy to answer, and can often be puzzling to cutters themselves. But if we look at cutting that takes the form of words, a cate-

gory of cutting in which the communicative aspect is specially manifest, we see that anger is the feeling most frequent. In the material we find FUCK OFF, I HATE U/ME and other ways of expressing of anger cut into the skin in 25% of all of the images with words. Followed by disgust often directed against themselves (16%). Anyway the anger is not the expression of a passive victim, it comes from somebody that are putting up a fight. Saying FTW!

Elaine Scarry has said that pain is something encapsulated and introvert – not just hard to speak about, but actually destroying language and replacing it with unarticulated groins and screams (1985:4). I would like to see cutting as an act of opposition to Scarry's notion. Skin becomes a surface for inscription in wounds and blood that gives pain a shape and perhaps makes it possible to handle (at least for a moment). The fact that the substance, the ground of the text is based on a basic, humanly shared experience – being in a body that feels pain and are wounded, cutting has maybe a possibility to bridge over other differences. On the internet this shared experience is the ground for a community, a network of cutters, that is based on the conception of a shared experience.

Trying to formulate a third position

In my work with this material I've, as you've seen, been dissatisfied with traditional feminist approach to visual culture. To read the image of cutting as a victim suffering from the oppression of a patriarchal order is way of sanction notions of women and girls as subordinate and without the possibility to act. A here argue for an interpretation of the act of cutting as an act of resistance, with the possibility to express pride.

In the study there's no difference between images if it's produced by a female or a male, there's few contextualizing elements in them. They are communication through the skin. The skin becomes the arena on which discourse is formulated.

Some contemporary psychoanalytic theoretic could support this interpretation. In search of approaches that conquer the phallogocentric ground for the formation of identity (as in the writing of Freud) the literature historian Lilian Munk Rösing is suggesting that the skin should be a metaphor for the relation between woman and man (sexuality is then more about the meeting of two persons through the skin instead of something centered around penetration). She's deriving her approach from the French psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu and his writings about skin ego. Inspired by these approaches and without lingering to long on their theories (because the lack of time) I would like to suggest that the skin actually is the place where identity (symbolically) is constituted. And that identity is to be understood as a discursive formation in/on the skin where textual understanding of experiences from under it, from the inside, and from the outside is made sense of, is understood or tried to made sense of. This challenges notions that identity is something that comes from inside as well as notions that identity is wrote upon the skin from outside (that skin is an unwritten page for discursive constructing the identity).

As a consequence of this gender differences isn't important any longer; men, women and other gender formations all has the possession of skin in common. That's why we could see the skin ego as a third position that unites people and creates a new location for closure, for making meaning to the world. The skin ego perspective could also explain why the practice of cutting has increased in the post traditional, postmodern world. In the contemporary western society the traditional base for creating identity has been replaced by the ideology that identity is a choice. This together with postmodern criticism of essential values and an emphases of the surface could be one explanation for the reason to make sense of inner

chaos on the skin. By cutting in the skin a connection between the two identity shaping “worlds” is established and the cuts becomes in fact the text, a discursive closure (or at least a attempt to closure) that challenges other discourses on the field. I call this *The discourse of cutting*.